

A Short History of Rock 'n' Roll

Tracing the development of rock 'n' roll music is much like following a river fed by many tributaries, so we begin in the early 20th century with the ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, who traveled with his son John throughout the United States making field recordings of folk musicians for the Library of Congress and its Archive of American Folk Song.

One of the musicians the Lomaxes found was Hudie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly (his preferred spelling), who was soon to be released from prison, where he likely heard a song, *Midnight Special*, that would become influential in early rock 'n' roll and which would be recorded by many rock bands.

In 1934 the Lomaxes came upon an old African American religious song -- *Run Old Jerimiah* -- sung in the style known as a ring shout, which the *Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock 'n Roll* says would "anticipate all key aspects of rock 'n' roll."

The Lomaxes also recorded 16-year-old Georgia Turner in eastern Kentucky singing a song with roots in a 16th century ballad that evolved through iterations in France and England before landing in North America, where the song became part of the repertoire of many American folksingers, including Dave van Ronk and Bob Dylan. In 1964 a band that was part of the British Invasion of rock to the United States recorded a version of that song, *House of the Rising Sun*, that reached No. 1 on the pop music charts.

Seventy years after the Civil War, two landmark recording sessions took place in Texas, the first in late November 1936 in San Antonio and the second in Dallas in mid-June of 1937. During those sessions, Robert Johnson recorded 29 of his songs, including several tunes that would be discovered in the mid-20th century by rock musicians from Macon, Georgia to London, England, who also recorded them. The songs included *Come into My Kitchen* and *Crossroads*.

Too often, the blues are associated with male guitarists, from the early bluesmen to rockers. But in the 1930s, Sister Rosetta Tharpe was gaining popularity recording and performing gospel songs with the newly created electric guitar. She was among the first to perform with it while using heavy distortion. Decades later, her singing style would influence Little Richard and her playing would be adopted by celebrated guitarists including Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton and Keith Richards.

The blues women were heard by Black audiences at traveling vaudeville shows, and later in film. Performers such as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, known as the "Mother of the Blues," and her disciple, Bessie Smith, known as the "Empress of the Blues," established a singing style that can still be heard nearly a century later.

The blues would become influential in the development of jazz in New Orleans, which incorporated percussion and rhythm highlighted by improvisation and also merging Western European harmony with African rhythms. Swing bands in the 1940s would add more backbeat and rhythm.

As African Americans continued to migrate from the south to the north in the post-World War II era, popular Black music expanded in the clubs of urban centers and became known as Rhythm and Blues. Traveling across America, it also would be called Race Music, as all Black music was marketed to an audience that heard gospel music during Sunday church services, which was an integral part of life in the African American community. Two popular performers whose style was influenced by their gospel roots were Ruth Brown and Etta James.

By the early 1950s, R&B influenced music was broadcast nationally on the radio. In Chicago, the brothers Leonard and Phil Chess opened a recording studio to capture the sound of musicians like McKinley Morganfield, better known as Muddy Waters, who recorded a song in 1950 about a man who traveled around the country. It was called *Rollin' Stone*. Twelve years later a band of musicians in England, who began played blues music, would take that song to name their band and in 1967 a young writer, Jann Wenner, would use it to name his music magazine.

Another branch of the roots of rock 'n' roll continued to develop after the Great Depression in the form country music, a hybrid of the string band mountain folk music played in rural America – a forerunner of bluegrass – and the ensemble vocal harmonies of gospel songs sung in church. By the middle of the 20th century, country music moved to a singer and band format. Hank Williams emerged as the Father of Modern Country Music, writing songs that became standards in the genre.

The fusion of country music and bluegrass combined with a backbeat from rhythm and blues in the urban south to forge a new sound called rockabilly. At the Sun Studios in Memphis, Tennessee Carl Perkins recorded *Blue Suede Shoes*. In 1951, with national radio broadcasting beginning to diversify its musical sounds, a disc jockey in Cleveland was playing many of these sounds. Alan Freed gave this emerging music a name: rock 'n' roll.

Four years later, a film about a World War II veteran teaching juvenile delinquents in an inner-city high school opened. As “Blackboard Jungle” began, teenagers in movie theaters got up and started dancing in the aisles to the music playing over the opening credits. The song was recorded the previous year by a country and western singer who had decided to change his sound. The song did not chart initially, but after it was heard in “Blackboard Jungle,” *Rock Around the Clock* by Bill Haley and His Comets was re-issued and went to No. 1 on the Billboard charts in July of 1955, marking the dawn of the rock 'n' roll era.

Three months after Haley left the recording session in New York City, a young truck driver from Mississippi arrived at Sun Studios in Memphis and sang a song written in 1941 by the Delta blues musician Arthur Crudup. Two days after Elvis Presley recorded *That's Alright Mama*, Memphis disc jockey Dewey Phillips played it on WHBQ radio. As Presley began to perform concerts, his singing and movements on stage resulted in enthusiastic audience responses, especially from teenage girls, echoing the response to Frank Sinatra by the Bobby Soxers generation of teens a decade earlier.

One of Presley's contemporaries was Richard Penniman, who performed as Little Richard, giving voice to a more vibrant sound of rock 'n' roll that soon crossed over from R&B stations to white pop stations with songs like *Tutti Frutti* and *Good Golly Miss Molly*.

Meanwhile in St. Louis, Chuck Berry was writing songs and performing, creating the double stop lick of two notes played simultaneously to create his signature guitar riff in records like *Roll Over Beethoven* and *Johnny B. Goode*. It was a sound that would travel to teenage guitar players throughout the United States, cross the Atlantic Ocean to England and continue around the world.

In Lubbock, Texas, Buddy Holly took the next major step in the evolution of what was becoming mainstream rock 'n' roll by writing and performing his own songs, including *That'll Be the Day* and *Peggy Sue*, and wanting a voice in how that would be done. He only recorded for three years before he died in a plane crash with Richie Valens and the Big Bopper in February 1959, known as The Day the Music Died, in the lyric from Don McLean's song, *American Pie*.

But only four years *after Rock Around the Clock* had launched the popularity of rock 'n' roll, there was a crisis. Soon after Holly died, Little Richard decided to return to his gospel roots and started recording evangelical music; Chuck Berry was in jail after being arrested and convicted of taking a 14-year-old girl over state lines to work in one of his nightclubs. As the Cold War expanded between the United States and Soviet Union after the Second World War, young men had to register for the military draft. In 1960, one of those young men who had to serve in the Army was Elvis Presley.

For the next three years, the music charts were a mix of novelty songs (*Alley-Oop* by the Hollywood Argyles, *The Twist* by Chubby Checker), songs by teenage television stars like Ricky Nelson (*Travelin' Man*) of "Ozzie and Harriet" and Shelly Fabares (*Johnny Ange*) of "The Donna Reed Show," and pop tunes and songs that later would spur juke box musicals on Broadway like "Smokey Joe's Café," the songs of Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, and "The Jersey Boys" the story of the Four Seasons.

But the seeds had been planted and new roots were growing both in America and across the ocean, where Lonnie Donagan's skiffle recordings and blues musicians like Alexis Korner sparked teenagers to pick up guitars and play. The rock 'n' roll harvest would be delivered on Feb. 7, 1964, when an early morning flight from London landed in New York City, launching the British Invasion of a fresh sound for rock 'n' roll.

The Beatles had listened to Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Motown records and more. The Beatles played this music in their shows and recorded some of them as covers on their first records. With the door kicked open by the lads from Liverpool, bands like the Kinks, Troggs, and the guys who took their name from a Muddy Waters song, The Rolling Stones, also traveled to the United States. What is known as Beatlemania hit in 1964, when the Beatles had the top 5 songs on the Billboard charts.

New life for rock 'n' roll on the West Coast grew with the surf sound started by Jan and Dean and expanded by The Beach Boys and the group's leader, the tortured genius of rock Brian Wilson.

A lot of pop music was about cars and dating, but by the mid-60s social activism in America was influencing musicians. Bob Dylan came out of the activist folk tradition of Woody Guthrie and he added depth to his music, which other musicians heard.

In California, The Byrds, who were influenced by The Beatles, took several of Dylan's songs [*Mr. Tambourine Man*, *All I Really Want to Do*], electrified them and moved up the charts, pioneering the folk-rock genre. The Mamas and the Papas focused on four-part harmony and found success the same way helping to further diversify rock 'n' roll.

Meanwhile Phil Spector, former singer with The Teddy Bears (*To Know Him is to Love Him*), became the caricature of the wild record producer. He relentlessly drove his musicians in the studio to find the sound he was looking for behind the singers who he recorded, which he would call The Wall of Sound. The Righteous Brothers recorded one of the songs that built the Wall of Sound, *You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling*.

But Spector's sound was created for single records, such as *Be My Baby* by The Ronettes. The popular music business had long been geared primarily to single recordings. With enough single hits, there could be an album. However, popular music was diversifying in many other ways, as the rhythm and blues roots of rock began to cross over to create a new genre called soul.

Ray Charles was performing in the 1950s, primarily as a jazz singer and pianist, when he brought rhythm & blues and gospel tones into his music, which crossed over to the pop charts in songs like *What'd I Say*.

James Brown broke new ground with an equally rhythmic style of music that also crossed over to pop audiences with records including *Papa's Got a Brand New Bag* and *I Got You (I Feel Good)*. In Detroit, the daughter of the civil rights activist Rev. C.L. Franklin was moving from the gospel songs she sang in the church to record secular music. Aretha Franklin soon found a national audience.

In Memphis, where Elvis first recorded, the Stax Record Label attracted a variety of musicians steeped in blues and R&B. The house band in the studio was an integrated ensemble which had a hit with the instrumental, *Green Onions*. Booker T. Jones played organ, Al Jackson on drums, Steve Cropper on guitar and Donald "Duck" Dunn on bass band backed up all the singers on the label, including Sam & Dave and Otis Redding.

In Detroit, Berry Gordy Jr. was writing songs but wanted to start his own record label, which he named after the Motor City: Motown Records. He worked with his friend William Robinson, better known as Smokey, to write songs that would be recorded with the young people he heard singing on the city's street corners. Motown taught its young singers how to be performers with tightly arranged vocals, choreographed dance moves and dressed in stylish clothes. Motown performers began to attract integrated audiences in the U.S. and in England.

All this occurred during a critical time in America that included the tension of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, the increasing U.S. involvement with the Vietnam War, and within a five-year period that included the

assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy.

Yet people of all backgrounds were listening to music together and the pop music charts were increasingly integrated as well. The music industry itself was undergoing a substantial shift, moving from a business based in single hit records to an emphasis on long-playing albums and the introduction of better sound on the expanding FM radio band.

In 1965, The Beatles stopped touring and returned to the studio to use the lessons they learned from Bob Dylan, Motown and folk music. They were no longer simply a pop band. They record the album "Rubber Soul," which is characterized by mature writing, more varied instruments, and a new creativity infused into their music.

Brian Wilson also stopped touring with the Beach Boys and after hearing "Rubber Soul" began work on the album that he later said would become his musical response – "Pet Sounds."

The following year, The Beatles returned to the Abbey Road Studios and expanded on what they had done with "Rubber Soul." Concept albums had previously been done by Frank Zappa and others, but with "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band," The Beatles begin to color outside of the musical lines, with different recording techniques and orchestration.

Released in June of 1967, Sgt. Pepper changed the mindset what could be done on a recording, challenging musicians to think differently, play different instruments and write different lyrics.

Other aspects of the music industry were also changing. John Phillips of The Mamas and the Papas was thinking about staging a concert to reflect music's new direction. He led a group that organized the Monterey International Pop Festival in California, the first major festival of contemporary music. The significance of Monterey Pop was its wide range of performers, which included a guitarist from Seattle named Jimi Hendrix, who had backed up James Brown before going to England to form a new band with other musicians and establish a new sound.

Otis Redding from the Stax label also performed before an integrated audience for the first time after playing only before Black audiences in the south. He was the most dynamic performer at Monterey Pop, backed by the integrated Stax house band, Booker T & the MGs. Such new sounds in rock 'n' roll were already being exposed to a wider audience on the stereo sound of FM radio, which continued to expand around the country.

1967 also brought forward what would become known as the psychedelic era, fueled by growing recreational drug use. In the Haight Ashbury district of San Francisco, one of the bands was the Jefferson Airplane, singing a song about Alice in Wonderland, with drug references, "White Rabbit." There also was the Grateful Dead, which is considered the first jam band, supported by a traveling group of devoted fans known as Deadheads, who attended multiple concerts. All these groups performed at Monterey Pop, where a young singer from Texas was also heard before a large audience for the first time. Janis Joplin fronted Big Brother and the Holding Company.

Further south in California, in Los Angeles, there was more of a blues-based rock 'n' roll emerging. The Doors played blues tunes and wrote their own songs.

What started as a general popular music industry chart in Billboard Magazine had already expanded to additional genres, including dance, R&B and country.

Rock 'n' roll now begins to explode as a force in popular culture. In 1966 Pete Townshend of The Who talked in an interview of developing a concept album about a deaf and blind boy who played pinball. In 1969 The Who released Tommy, which would become the center of two movies, three different studio recordings and a Broadway musical.

As 1960s closed, the war in Vietnam was raging and there was disagreement in American society about the war. Civil Rights legislation was passed in Congress. The women's rights movement was gaining momentum. It was thought that music could be one way to bring people together. Michael Lang and Artie Kornfeld led the effort in 1969 for what became the Woodstock Music and Arts Festival in upstate New York. The concert planned for a few thousand people turned into a gathering of 400,000 people that the organizers were not prepared for. It was like a large city with some problems – torrential rain, not enough food or portable bathrooms, some drug abuse --- but the crowd of largely teenagers and young adults remained peaceful.

As the year closed, it also was the beginning of the end for many things. The Beatles, who had started in the late 1950s and signified the decade of the 60s, were going in separate directions as people and as artists. As 1969 turned into 1970, The Beatles ceased to exist as a group.

In America and elsewhere, people were exhausted from the events of the 1960s. Turmoil and violence throughout the world – from the streets of the U.S. to Vietnam, Africa, Europe and the Middle East – had worn people out. The music began to reflect it as well.

Moving into the last part of the 20th century there was more introspection, looking forward toward hope. Singer-songwriters such as James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, who had listened to Lennon and McCartney, Hendrix, Motown and Dylan, started writing their own music. On the west coast, country rock emerges with groups like The Eagles, who started as the touring band for Linda Ronstadt. There also was a more pedestrian sound in music of the early 1970s with chart hits that included *Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head* by B.J. Thomas, *You and Me and a Dog Named Boo* by Lobo and *Knock Three Times* by Dawn.

Again, a boost comes from England with bands like The Faces, with Rod Stewart as the lead singer and a guitarist named Ronnie Wood, who later would join The Rolling Stones. The British influence also continued. Fleetwood Mac began as a blues band in England in the 1960s and went through 10 incarnations, a move to California and then exploded in 1975 after Lindsay Buckingham and Stevie Nicks joined the group.

Technology continued to change the music. Progressive rock gained popularity in the dance clubs of Europe and Emerson, Lake and Palmer took classical music, turned it inside out

and sent it back to the United States. Theme albums became more common with groups like Pink Floyd.

Rock always has a rebellious side, no more so than with punk rock, which begins in the mid-1970s in England with short, aggressive tunes by bands like The Sex Pistols and in New York City with The Ramones.

In 1976 New York magazine published a partially fictitious story about the dance club scene in New York City that became a film. "Saturday Night Fever" had a soundtrack led by The Bee Gees, a trio of brothers from Australia who had pop chart hits in the 1960s. The star of the film is John Travolta mostly known for the TV show "Welcome Back Kotter." Disco dance music becomes popular with performers like Donna Summer and Barry White.

Another shift in rock began in England, where The Yardbirds formed in the early 1960s as a blues band before going through several lead guitarists, including Eric Clapton who left when the band moved toward pop. He's replaced by Jeff Beck, who is replaced by Jimmy Page. Page brings the band back to its blues roots and soon, the group is reformed as Led Zeppelin, whose heavy sound paves the way for what would be called metal that also gains popularity with bands such as Black Sabbath.

In the United States, Aerosmith comes out of Boston and adds a flourish to what becomes glam-rock—big hair, fashion. Kiss puts on make-up.

Reaction comes from different parts of the country. In the south a new iteration of Jam Bands emerges with the Allman Brothers, featuring multiple percussion and guitarists – a bit of gospel, blues, and rock 'n' roll. Lynyrd Skynyrd emerges with their own style. These sounds carry through the 1970s and toward the last part of the 20th Century.

On Dec. 8, 1980, for many of the Baby Boom generation the end of the ideals of Sixties arrives with the shooting of John Lennon in New York City. He had just finished a recording session for the Double Fantasy album. He had moved from being a pop star to a peace activist, humanitarian, and citizen of the world. Peace, love, and rock 'n' roll was no more in the minds of music fans.

Five months earlier music had again changed with the beginning of radio that you could watch. *Video Killed the Radio Star* by The Buggles was the first video played on Music Television in August of 1980. MTV changed the music industry in many ways. Women were always part of pop and rock music, primarily as solo singers or in vocal groups, but not seen primarily playing instruments and writing songs. MTV was more visual, and women emerge as bigger stars. Cyndi Lauper, The Go Gos, Joan Jett, and The Bangles.

Technology continued to change as well. Electronic music in the dance clubs of Europe by bands like Kraftwerk and New Order. This combination of dance club music, fashion and electronics becomes the new disco. Leading this transition was a woman who came out of the clubs, dressing differently and writing about controversial topics. Madonna becomes a superstar. Others soon followed, and her influence would extend into the 21st Century with performers such as Pink, Katie Perry, and Lady Ga Ga.

Part of the response to the emphasis on videos, splashy show productions on stage was a back-to-basics approach by those who had earned their success playing multiple sets in bars and small clubs in the 1970s. They made videos, but with less splash.

Bruce Springsteen breaks out of New Jersey, John Mellencamp comes out of the heartland of Indiana, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers emerge from Florida, and R.E.M. rises from Georgia.

The 1980s also brings forth the next generation of R&B musicians who were influenced by the Godfather of Soul, the Queen of Soul, and the Motown sound. George Clinton was a former barber from Plainfield, N.J. who led a vocal group called the Parliaments, which had a hit with *I Just Wanna Testify* in 1967. He moved to Detroit, heard hard rock bands, worked for Motown and developed a sound he called funk, based on the syncopated beat pioneered by James Brown. Clinton created a stage show that foretold MTV videos with beats and talking blues rhymes that laid the foundation for hip hop with records like "Mothership Connection."

In 1980 MC Hammer recorded *Don't Touch This*, crossing over from the R&B to the pop charts, helping to draw other city kids to the music, which becomes known as rap, led by artists such as Run DMC and LL Cool J. What makes this sound different are lyrics, which address social issues focused on life in urban areas, much like the influence of Bob Dylan and Marvin Gaye in addressing social and political concerns in the mid-1960s.

Music always evolves within a genre and there was a divide between the urban and suburban rap groups. The city kids focus on societal issues and the suburban kids were more interested in less global matters. Just as R&B, dance and rock 'n' roll evolved, so did rap, branching off into new directions including more controversial styles such as gangsta.

Punk is resurrected in the late 1980s in a form of heavy metal through bands like Motorhead, Anthrax and Metallica. This sound later evolves into a subgenre called grunge in Seattle when Nirvana breaks through with "Nevermind" in 1991, influencing their disciples, Alice in Chains, Soundgarden and Pearl Jam.

As the 20th century draws to a close, another infusion of sounds moves into the pop mainstream as musicians from around the world begin to cross over with an emphasis on ethnic heritage.

World music was touched on briefly in the 1960s with one hit wonders such as the *Lion Sleeps Tonight* – an African folk song by The Tokens; *Sukiaki* from Japan by Kyu Sakamoto and *I Can See Clearly Now*, a reggae tune by Johnny Nash.

Gloria Estefan and Miami Sound Machine have a hit with a cover of a 1976 disco track by Vickie Sue Robinson, *Turn the Beat Around*, and continue with their Cuban-influenced sound. Paul Simon goes to South Africa to record with musicians who invited him to play and record during a boycott because of its apartheid policies and produces "Graceland." Los Lobos, a California band, took the influence of early Latino rockers such as Ritchie Valens and Freddy Fender and toured with their own brand of Latin-influenced rock and roll.

As the 20th century begins to enter its last decade, rock 'n' roll moved from blues, jazz, country, and R&B to a kaleidoscope of sound in about 40 years. Then an interesting thing happens.

In 1994, Eric Clapton, who left the Yardbirds because it was not enough of a blues band for him, records an album called "From the Cradle," playing songs by the blues masters, including Robert Johnson and Lead Belly.

"From the Cradle" becomes No. 1 on the Billboard chart. It is the first time a blues record gets to the top of the charts. Concurrently, the complete recordings of Robert Johnson are remastered and released. It also goes to No. 1 on the album charts.

The genre of rock 'n' roll has come full circle from the blues as a foundational part of rock 'n' roll to a blues record going to the top of pop charts. As the pioneers and innovators of rock 'n' roll have gone into history, their music is resurrected in jukebox musicals on Broadway such as the first one in 1977, "Beatlemania," and then ABBA's "Mama Mia," The Four Season's "Jersey Boys," and Carole King's "Beautiful," among others.

The sounds of today continue to diversify, in some instances turning back the clock. After the consolidation of the recording industry in the late 20th century, the transition from vinyl to compact discs and the expansion of the internet, the music industry has gone back to when it was a singles business. Today's audiences want to download individual songs. Everyone has a smartphone to carry the music in their pocket. Recording studios are not necessary. Anyone can make a recording of music on a laptop computer, make a video with their phone, upload it, use social media to spread the word about it. Yet in recent years vinyl records and turntables have returned to the marketplace.

A handful of classical music compositions have stood the test of time for centuries, -- the popular music of its time -- written by a few composers whose work is still recorded and performed. The rock 'n' roll era began nearly 70 years ago in 1955. Most rock 'n' roll pioneers are gone. A handful of classic rock musicians still may be performing, but most are retired, soon to be retired. Few are making new music. A question to consider: What music from today will stand the test of time and be remembered, revered, or played in 20, 50, or 100 years?

Something to keep in mind about the impact of rock 'n' roll:

When the Voyager 1 space probe was launched in 1977 to study the outer part of the solar system, it included a gold-plated audio-visual disc for whatever intelligent life might find the ship. The disc has photos and greetings from dignitaries and sounds of Earth such as whales and a crying baby. There is also a collection of music from around the world. One of the tracks is *Johnny B. Goode* by Chuck Berry.

Ken Best

