RHYTHM & BLUES AND THE PUSH TOWARD SOUL

"Rock & roll" was, at first, just another name for the rhythm & blues that was starting to reach a young white audience. The new name was used to obscure the music's black origins, but it became something of a self-fulfilling prophesy as the music itself began to change in recognition of that new audience. To varying degrees and in varying manners, R&B artists began tailoring their music and lyrics to the ears, dance steps and wallets of American teenagers while striving, at the same time, to maintain their core audience of older and more world-wise R&B fans.

Rhythm & blues" was as vague as most musical labels, broad enough to encompass soft Ink Spots ballads, jazzy jump-blues numbers and raucous rock precursors like "Rocket 88" and "Shake, Rattle and Roll." Ultimately it had little specific meaning beyond "music made by black artists for a black audience," and even that generalization was rendered inoperative by the new rock & roll fans (though the label "rhythm & blues" continued to be applied exclusively to black artists). The arrival of Elvis and the crossover success of black artists made the distinction between "rhythm & blues" and "rock & roll" difficult to define in terms of either audience or musical style. The most successful artists crafted personal styles that transcended musical boundaries, though the issue of "labeling" remained. Some, like Little Richard and Bo Diddley, felt that "rhythm & blues" had become a demeaning term and preferred the even racial footing of "rock & roll." Others, such as Fats Domino, proudly affirmed their musical and cultural roots by continuing to call their music "rhythm & blues," while still others echoed Chuck Berry's attitude of "Who cares as long as it sells?"

Records by black artists *did* sell in unprecedented numbers, though for all the doors that rock & roll helped open, it was still difficult for black artists to achieve the type of success that so many white acts enjoyed. Most recorded for small, independent labels (even established "indies" like Atlantic, Chess, Specialty, Imperial and King were dwarfed by the economic clout of the major labels) and depended on a core following in the R&B market to sustain their careers between scattered pop hits. As a whole, the doo-wop groups were most successful at making inroads into the rock & roll market, since the relative anonymity of the groups helped them overcome the racial barriers that made personal identification with a single black artist difficult (though few groups were able to sustain careers beyond a hit or two, since that type of identification was a central ingredient in rock's appeal).

Chuck Berry, Fats Domino and Little Richard were the only three black solo artists who gained a mass acceptance on a par with the era's white stars. All three projected images—Eternal Teenager, jolly fat man, raving lunatic—that helped to shift the focus and make their race a secondary issue. While none could rival that trio in terms of sustained popularity in the rock market, a steady stream of black singers and performers kept R&B in the pop charts through the 1950's.

Johnny Ace

Johnny Ace is better-known for his dramatic death than for his music, though his smooth and sensual style made him something of a heartthrob for his legions of female fans and would have served him well in the pop market had he survived into the rock &

roll era. Ace came from Memphis and was a member of the "Beale Streeters," a loose band of Memphis blues luminaries that included Bobby "Blue" Bland, Junior Parker and B. B. King. After moving to Houston, Ace signed with Duke Records and launched an impressive string of R&B successes with 1952's "My Song." Despite his strong blues background, Ace specialized in romantic ballads in the Nat "King" Cole vein and was one of the last of the "sepia Sinatras" descended from Cole and Charles Brown's club blues style. The sensual Ace was something of a heartthrob for his legions of female fans. His rich baritone was used to best effect on "**Pledging My Love**," a straightforward pronouncement of love in a slow-dance tempo backed by a smooth supperclub sax & vibes accompaniment from the Johnny Otis Orchestra. "Pledging My Love" was a Top Twenty crossover hit in 1955, but Ace did not live to see the record's success. Intent on impressing a female friend, Ace shot himself in a game of Russian roulette and died backstage at the Houston City Auditorium on Christmas Eve 1954.

Wilbert Harrison

Wilbert Harrison had recorded since the early fifties without much success before his recording of Leiber and Stoller's "**Kansas City**" ambled its way to #1 in 1959, beating out five other simultaneously released versions of the same song. Originally recorded as "K. C. Lovin'" by Little Willie Littlefield in 1952, Harrison's definitive version is a "melodic blues" with a distinctive shuffle rhythm, a gentle boogie bass, a rock & roll guitar solo and an easygoing melody that glides between pop, blues and R&B. Harrison toured as a one-man band, playing guitar, piano, drums and harmonica, and remained a "one-hit wonder" for over a decade before returning to the charts in 1970 with his own "Let's Work Together," which was covered the same year by Canned Heat.

Etta James

Immortalized at 16 with "Roll With Me Henry," a 1955 "answer" to Hank Ballard & the Midnighters' "Work With Me Annie," Etta James made an easy transition from R&B to soul and developed a deeply personal singing and songwriting voice. James never caught on in a big way with the pop market, but she did score nine Top Forty hits that capped a twenty-year string of R&B hits. She worked with bandleader Johnny Otis on the Modern label in the fifties, then moved to Chicago in 1959 and signed with Chess Records, where she developed her gospel-inflected mature style. Her early sixties hits included "Something's Got a Hold On Me," "All I Could Do Was Cry" and "Pushover." After a fallow period in the mid-sixties, and a debilitating battle with heroin, James reemerged in 1967 in the southern soul capital, Muscle Shoals, Alabama, where she recorded the classic "I'd Rather Go Blind" and her biggest pop hit, "**Tell Mama**." "Tell Mama" was covered by Janis Joplin, who looked to Etta James as an influence and a contemporary link in the chain of strong black female voices dating back to Bessie Smith.

Screamin' Jay Hawkins

Screamin' Jay Hawkins earned a place among rock immortals with the strangest record of the fifties, his 1956 hit "**I Put a Spell On You**," and with a bizarre stage act that featured human skulls, snakes, ghoulish vampire costumes and dramatic entrances in flaming coffins that sent the youngest fans fleeing in terror while, from the balcony, his

stage crew dropped rubber bands on their heads and chanted "worms, worms." Hawkins recorded a string of flops on various small labels, including a restrained original version of "I Put a Spell On You," written when Hawkins' girlfriend left him in 1954, that caught the ear of Columbia Records head Arnold Matson, who signed Hawkins to Okeh Records, Columbia's R&B subsidiary.

A stellar backup band was assembled for a remake of "I Put a Spell on You" that could capture that frenzy of Hawkins' stage act. The session was disappointing and strangely subdued, however, until Hawkins finally admitted that his unhinged live style owed much to the fact that he was rarely sober onstage. A case of muscatel soon remedied the problem and inspired a truly demented performance from a blind-drunk Hawkins and an equally inebriated group of professional sessionmen now reduced to struggling to stay in tune, in time and out of fits of convulsive laughter.

The screams and groans that punctuate and finally consume "I Put a Spell on You" add up to a fit of recorded psychosis that is truer to the painful inspiration for the song than any "straight" reading could have been. The screams, the ominous minor key, the drunken simplicity of the arrangement and the sick, death-waltz tempo might have added up to a mere novelty record if Hawkins' lunacy hadn't seemed so disturbingly real. As it is, it stands as a testament to maniacal, possessive jealousy—and to the uninhibited expression inspired by recording on the edge of an alcohol blackout (Hawkins couldn't remember recording the song, and was surprised and horrified when he finally heard it).

"I Put a Spell on You" was too much for many radio stations, even with the sexual moans edited out of the end of the song. The record failed to crack the Top Forty, but it was an instant cult classic and kept Hawkins' vampirish stage act in hot demand. Hawkins eventually came to resent the freakish typecasting that locked him into the role of monstrous comic relief. Still, for an artist with only one hit, Screamin' Jay Hawkins has had quite an impact: he virtually invented the black comedy "rock theater" that inspired Arthur Brown, Screaming Lord Sutch, Alice Cooper, David Bowie and many others, though for sheer high-camp horror, the old master has never been equaled. As Hawkins himself put it, "I just torment a song—frighten it half to death."[i]

Little Willie John

Little Willie John was an important "proto-soul" singer who incorporated gospel's emotional delivery and helped expand R&B's musical vocabulary, though he never achieved the fame that his great voice and talent warranted. John's recordings for the Cincinnati-based King label had a profound influence on Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson and many others, especially his King labelmate James Brown, who served as John's opening act on several tours. John had his first R&B hits in 1955 with "All Around the World," a jump blues dance number, and "Need Your Love So Bad," a sensuous, longing ballad that revealed the quiet intensity of John's softer style. The pained, pleading feel of "Need Your Love So Bad" was echoed in "Let Them Talk," "Person to Person," the great "Talk To Me, Talk To Me" and other songs that formed a virtual blueprint for later soul ballads.

John's best-known song and first crossover success was 1956's "**Fever**," which was written by the ubiquitous Otis Blackwell (though he sold the copyright for $50). The smoky jazz arrangement and urgent sensuality of John's original "Fever" was rekindled two year's later in a hit version for Peggy Lee. John managed a final pair of pop hits in 1960 with "Heartbreak" and the Tin Pan Alley standard, "Sleep." His rock-styled "Leave

My Kitten Alone" wasn't a hit but was a favorite of sixties British groups (including the Beatles, who recorded a great version that was never officially released).

Little Willie John shot and killed a man during a drunken argument in a Seattle bar in 1965, and died of pneumonia in prison in 1968. James Brown, who recorded a tribute album called *Thinking of Little Willie John and Other Nice Things*, recalls his friend and mentor: "Little Willie John was a soul singer before anyone thought to call it that... the man died young, died in prison. But the man left his mark. On my music, on lots of singers who understand how to sing with feelin'."[ii]

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[i]N. Cohn, "Rock From the Beginning" (New York: Stein & Day, 1969), p. 36.
[ii]Gerri Hirshey, "Nowhere to Run" (New York: Penguin, 1885), p. 59.