RHYTHM & BLUES

The big bands died out during the World War II years for a number of reasons, including the War itself, which depleted the bands and made touring and recording virtually impossible due to the rationing of tires, gas, shellac and other materials. In addition, wartime taxes forced many clubs to close and made large bands impractical and smaller units a necessity. A musicians' union recording ban in 1942 and 1943—a doomed effort to combat the "threat" of the juke box and pre-recorded radio broadcasts—contributed to swing's decline as well. The end was further hastened by restless musicians who were tired of the strict arrangements and forced anonymity of the big bands, and anxious to explore newer and more personal terrain. The **bebop** style of jazz pioneered by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie took jazz out of the ballrooms and put it into intimate clubs where serious aficionados went to *listen*, rather than dance, to bebop's complex rhythms and melodies. The music itself had little influence on rock & roll, which occupied the other end of the difficulty spectrum, but the subculture that surrounded bebop—the "beats" and the jazz-paced poetry, the hipster slang and dress, and the Bohemian lifestyle chronicled by Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsburg and other writers—served as a fertile source of imagery for the rock subcultures to come (and provided yet another installment of white fascination with black music and style).

Dancehall Rhythm & Blues

Plenty of people still wanted to dance, however, and as the popular singers and bebop players each, in their way, moved further from the dance beat, a third offshoot of the swing era brought that beat to a new prominence. As the big bands broke into smaller units, jazz and the blues went their separate ways into bebop units and dancehall R&B—or "**jump blues**"—bands that played straightforward music with a big dance beat and broad appeal (along with enough contrasting mellow ballads mixed in to give couples a chance to slow-dance—the bands often traveled with designated "ballad singers" and "shouters"). The jump bands began as smaller, stripped-down versions of swing bands, consisting of a rhythm section and a couple of horns—a sax and trumpet, or two saxes—that played hard-driving riffs and solos over blues progressions, and a boogie-derived (or shuffle) bass and beat. The overall rhythm was punched up by accented backbeats (one TWO three FOUR, instead of ONE two THREE four) that demanded motion on the dancefloor. The featured soloists were usually sax players who abandoned the finely-tuned finesse of jazz for a raucous wail that matched the energy of the music. In similar fashion, the great R&B shouters, like Joe Turner and Ruth Brown, lacked the subtleties of the jazz singers but packed a wallop that could rise above a full-tilt band.

The Count Basie and Lionel Hampton bands were important bridges between swing and R&B: the lean, aggressive energy of Basie's 1937 "One O'Clock Jump," from 1937, and Hampton's 1942 recording of "Flying Home" were exciting signposts of things to come. Roy Milton's "R. M. Blues" and Joe Liggins' "The Honeydripper," both released in 1945, were a further shift away from the sophistication of jazz to a backbeat and boogie-dominated sound and party mood. The million selling success of both records also signaled the presence of a revitalized "race" market after the Depression and War years, and hinted at a significant number of white record buyers as well. Other

jump-era landmarks included Amos Milburn's "Bad Bad Whiskey" and Jimmy Liggins' "The Shuffleshuck," both from 1950, and Roy Brown's 1947 hit "Good Rockin' Tonight" (also recorded by Wynonie Harris the same year, and by Elvis Presley in 1954). "The Hucklebuck," a 1949 hit that popularized a dance of the same name, also made inroads into the white market in its original version by Paul Williams, in competing R&B versions by Roy Milton and Lionel Hampton, and in later versions recorded by white stars Frank Sinatra and Tommy Dorsey, anticipating the "crossover" pop hits by R&B artists and the white "cover" versions that were the first volleys of the 1950's rock & roll revolution.

Louis Jordan

Louis Jordan was the most popular jump blues bandleader of the late forties, and one of the few black entertainers of the time to consistently reach both white and black audiences. Born in Brinkley, Arkansas, in 1908, Jordan moved to New York and played alto sax in several big bands before starting his own smaller, streamlined group in 1938, which he dubbed the "Tympani Five" (though the number of players usually ranged from six to eight). Jordan combined swing riffs and arrangements, boogie bass lines, shuffling dance beats, catchy tunes, clear singing and humorous storytelling lyrics, and created a crowd-pleasing act that defined jump blues and expanded its audience. "With my little band, I did everything they did with the big band. *I made the blues jump*. After I got into the public, they said I should straddle the fence. I didn't know what they meant at first. But they meant that I shouldn't play just for Negroes, but for the world. Then I decided that when you come to hear Louis Jordan, you'd hear things to make you forget what you'd had to do the day before and just have a good time, a great time."[i]

Jordan specialized in upbeat novelty-style numbers in the comic vein of singer and bandleader Cab Calloway, who had demonstrated the prejudice-softening appeal of humor in the 1930's. A great showman, Jordan never went for comic effect at the expense of his music, but used humor to punctuate the great riffs and dance beats of hits like "Caldonia" (1945), "Choo Choo Ch'Boogie" (1946) and "Saturday Night Fish Fry" (1950), and he never lost sight of his core audience in his attempt to amuse everyone. His entertaining style remained rooted in the blues of his southern youth, and his songs were filled with "jive" talk and funny, lovingly-etched depictions of black life that amused both rural and urban black audiences along with his large following of white converts. Jordan's style was a decisive influence on Bill Haley and was the catalyst for Haley's transformation from western swing to rock & roll. Jordan was also a major influence on rock archetype Chuck Berry, who has often credited Jordan as an inspiration for his witty, rapid-fire lyrics and clear diction. (Berry also cites Jordan's guitar player, Carl Hogan, as an influence on the trademark chiming guitar riffs that open most Chuck Berry classics.)

The "Majors" and "Indies"

Louis Jordan's success was due in part to the fact that he recorded for Decca Records, a well-established major label with clout and connections that helped open doors to the white market. The Mills Brothers and the Ink Spots were also on the Decca roster, while Capitol Records was home to Nat "King" Cole, the only other black artist

able to consistently crack the white market in the 1940's. Aside from these significant exceptions, the large record labels—the "**majors**"—lost interest in the black market after a slump in sales during the Depression. The void was filled by many small independent labels—"**indies**"—devoted to black music and aimed at a black audience.[ii]

The indies posed little threat to the music establishment, or so it seemed until the indies and R&B began crossing over to the pop charts and pop audience on a large scale in the 1950's, siphoning sales and profits away from the large record labels. The indies formed something of a grassroots network that was the stomping ground for most rock & roll. The most famous small labels—Chicago's Chess Records, Memphis' Sun Records, Cincinnati's King Records—are now enshrined in rock legend, while others, most notably Atlantic Records, grew to be "majors" themselves. Other important indies of the era included the Savoy, Jubilee and Deluxe labels in New York; Modern, Aladdin, Imperial and Specialty in Los Angeles; Peacock and Duke in Houston; Vee Jay in Chicago; and, a bit later, the greatest indie success story of all, Detroit's Motown Records.

While the major labels snoozed and let the indies sneak away with the future of popular music, the large publishing houses of Tin Pan Alley and their performance rights organization, ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers), suffered a similar blow in the 1940's with the formation of BMI (Broadcast Music Incorporated). BMI was formed as an alternative licensing organization by radio broadcasters tired of ASCAP's stuffy monopoly and the high fees they were charged for playing any songs licensed by ASCAP, which nearly all popular hits were. In response, BMI licensed R&B, country and, eventually, rock & roll songs that ASCAP considered beneath its dignity, much to its later regret. The indies and BMI gave rhythm & blues a crucial outlet and a voice within the music industry that grew louder and louder until the Big Guys were finally forced to listen.

The West Coast & Johnny Otis

The presence of several independent record labels made Los Angeles a particularly important center for the development of rhythm & blues. Bandleader and talent scout Johnny Otis recalls the scene and the style: "Now, R&B started here in L.A. Roy Milton was here, Joe Liggins was here, T-Bone Walker was here, Charles Brown was here, I was here, and others, too. By '48 or '49 it was set—we had an art form, though we didn't know it then... It was a hybrid form that began to emerge. It surely wasn't big band; it wasn't swing; it wasn't country blues. It was what was to become known as rhythm & blues, a hybrid form that became an art form in itself. It was the foundation of rock & roll... Rock & roll was a direct outgrowth of R&B. It took over all the things that made R&B different from big band swing: the afterbeat on a steady four; the influence of boogie; the triplets on piano; eight-to-the-bar on the top-hat cymbal; and the shuffle pattern of dotted eighth and sixteenth notes."[iii]

The intimate "**club blues**" style popularized by the Nat "King" Cole Trio in the forties was carried on by other performers on the West Coast, including Charles Brown ("Drifting Blues," 1945; "Trouble Blues," 1949), Cecil Gant ("I Wonder," 1945), Percy Mayfield ("Please Send Me Someone to Love," 1950), and a young Ray Charles, who began as a Nat Cole imitator before finding his own style. (Billy Eckstine and, later, Johnny Mathis echoed the mainstream crooning side of Cole's appeal.) Soft club blues combos shared popularity with dancehall R&B bands on the West Coast, including

Johnny Otis' own Caravan of Stars, a touring company that was both the last of the great big band touring groups—a single band that backed a number of singers—and the forerunner of the rock & roll package shows that crisscrossed the country with a full roster of stars.

A Greek-American from the Los Angeles area, Johnny Otis grew up in the black community and felt so at home there that he simply called himself "black" and has done so ever since (with no argument on either side). He was one of the great bandleaders and talent scouts of the 1950's: Otis discovered Etta James, Little Esther Phillips, Big Mama Thornton, Jackie Wilson, the Midnighters, Little Willie John, Mel Walker, the Treniers, the Robins (later renamed the Coasters) and long list of other R&B stars, many of whom were featured singers on the Caravan of Stars. Otis was also a talented songwriter and producer. His biggest hit under his own name was 1958's "Willie and the Hand Jive," but he was also responsible for many hits for members of his troupe, including Etta James' "The Wallflower (Roll With Me Henry)" and Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton's original version of "Hound Dog," which he produced and co-authored with Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, a pair of young white songwriters who had a feel for the blues and a great future as the premiere songwriting team of the 1950's.

"Hound Dog" vs. "Doggie in the Window"

Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog" was a #1 R&B hit in 1953, while another "dog" song, Patti Page's "(How Much is That) Doggie in the Window," was the year's top pop seller. "Hound Dog" and "Doggie in the Window" pretty well defined the extremes of the early fifties, from tough blues to sugary pop, from black to white and young to old, BMI to ASCAP, small indie label, Peacock, to major giant Mercury...

While "Hound Dog" was recorded in Los Angeles, Thornton was a refugee from the Deep South and her deep, uncut blues growl was a perfect vehicle for the snarling lyrics, while the gutbucket guitar, bass and drums backing sounds straight out of the Delta—more blues than rhythm—and equally appropriate. By contrast, Page's French canary singing and "heavenly" strings & woodwinds arrangement sounds straight out of Nowhere—the land of polite entertainment with no personality. Actually, "Doggie in the Window" is sung well and quite cute and is even somewhat interesting as an early example of double-tracking, which allowed Page to sing each part of the song's sweet two-part harmonies (an effect she also used effectively on her biggest hit, 1951's "Tennessee Waltz"). Still, anyone who would prefer "Doggie in the Window" over "Hound Dog" is either *very* young or *very* old... One embodied a noble past while looking to the future of popular music, while the other embodied all the reasons why a new style of popular was so desperately needed, at least for anyone between the ages of ten and twenty.

Of course, no one in 1953 could have predicted that a song like "Hound Dog" would ever appeal to *teenagers*, especially white teenagers, but then no one could have imagined Elvis Presley in their wildest 1953 dreams either, or imagined how different "Hound Dog" could sound. Elvis turned it into one of the defining songs of rock & roll in 1956, and in the process reaffirmed rock's allegiance to the blues even while he was moving the music further away from it. The "Hound Dog" saga is often invoked as an example of a white artist stealing and profiting from black music, which it certainly is. It's worth remembering in this particular case, though, that the song was written by a pair

of young white kids and a Greek-American who was only "black" because he said he was—and that Elvis' version was actually inspired by a *lounge* act he saw doing the song as a novelty number in Las Vegas(!) With all that in mind, the "Dog" songs saga does indeed cover and confuse a lot of bases...

"Rocket 88"

The gritty southern sound of Thornton's "Hound Dog" was heard in full-band glory two years earlier in "Rocket 88," another #1 R&B hit that touched a lot of interesting bases. The song was recorded by singer **Jackie Brenston** backed by **Ike Turner & the Kings of Rhythm**, a young traveling troupe out of Clarksdale, Mississippi, in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, and was recorded in Sam Phillips' studio in Memphis then leased to Chicago's Chess Records because Sam had yet to start his own Sun label. Thus the "Rocket 88" saga brings together the Mississippi Delta (home of rural blues), Memphis (home of Beale Street), Chess (home of the greatest urban blues), Sam Phillips' Union Avenue studio (future home of Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash...) and Ike Turner (pivotal bandleader and future partner, for better or worse, of Tina Turner) and, of course, Jackie Brenston, a sax player for The Kings of Rhythm who really didn't have much of a future but did secure his place in rock history when he stepped up to sing lead on one of the consensus candidates for any list of "first rock songs."

Most interesting of all is the song itself, an over-amped, manic Delta version of jump blues that keeps an equal emphasis on "rhythm" and "blues" and really does sound like rock & roll, complete with a big booming beat and raucous saxophone and hyper-boogie Jerry Lee-style piano from Ike Turner. The boastful car lyrics and swaggering vocals would have suited Jerry Lee as well, and the aggressive overall sound of the backing wouldn't have seemed at all out of place behind Little Richard (who did credit "Rocket 88" with being the inspiration for "Good Golly Miss Molly"). Driving it all is a hard-boogie riff from a distorted "fuzzed" guitar—the result of a guitar amp's tumble off the top of the band's car—that is the crowning touch of the song's claim to rock status. As Sam Phillips recalled to Robert Palmer, "When it fell that burst the speaker cone. We had no way of getting it fixed... it would have taken a couple of days, so we started playing around with the damn thing. I stuffed a little paper in there where the speaker cone was ruptured, and it sounded good. It sounded like a saxophone. And we decided to go ahead and record."[iv] The "fuzz box" would not be invented for over a decade and wasn't popularized until Rolling Stone Keith Richards used one for the "Satisfaction" riff in place of the horn line he originally had in mind, much as Phillips opted for the distortion that "sounded like a saxophone." Phillips made a decision to go with the *feel* of the band and music at the expense of production niceties—a lesson he would apply to his explosive Howlin' Wolf recordings and, of course, to the experiments with Elvis and so many others in that same little room.

"Rocket 88" offered a prophetic look into the future, and was even covered, like "Hound Dog," by a white rocker often credited with "inventing" rock & roll. Bill Haley recorded "Rocket 88" in 1951 in a very early and extraordinary example of a white artist attuned to the sounds of rhythm & blues. The record went virtually unheard, however, and Haley would have to wait several more years for that same equation to click in his cover of Joe Turner's "Shake, Rattle & Roll." Ike Turner made many recordings in the

1950's that showcased his explosive piano and guitar playing, though none sold well and he was better known, like Johnny Otis, as a wide-ranging and brilliant talent scout, A&R man and bandleader. He settled in St. Louis in 1956 with a revamped Kings of Rhythm, married Annie Mae Bullock and embarked on a new career phase as "Ike & Tine Turner" with 1960's "A Fool in Love."

Atlantic Records

The crude sound of "Rocket 88" did not have universal appeal by any means, even within the rhythm & blues market. The R&B that came from the South was rougher and rawer than the dancehall blues of urban centers on the coasts, where the jazz influence was stronger and the audiences were more "refined" in their tastes. The classiest R&B came from Atlantic Records, a small indie label founded in 1947 by Ahmet Ertegun, the son of a Turkish ambassador to the United States, and his friend and fellow rhythm & blues fan, Herb Abramson. Long before it became a mega-label, home to the likes of Led Zeppelin, the Rolling Stones and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, and even before it dominated the soul music of the 1960's with Aretha Franklin, the Queen Herself, heading the way, Atlantic was the best of the R&B indies, with a roster that included Ray Charles, the Drifters, the Coasters, LaVern Baker and many R&B giants, and a reputation for well-crafted productions, well-engineered recordings and a welcome and genuine concern for their music and musicians.

Ertegun and Abramson were joined by Tom Dowd and Jerry Wexler, and by Ahmet's brother Nesuhi Ertegun, who developed the label's extensive jazz roster. The earliest Atlantic releases were mainly jazz-oriented jump blues, though the label's first bit hit came with the downhome "Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee" by "Sticks" McGhee. A couple of trips to New Orleans at the end of the 1940's led to sessions with the legendary Professor Longhair and convinced the Atlantic brain trust that they had to incorporate some of the city's Latin-tinged boogie and gutsy sound. (Southern styles were an equally big inspiration in Atlantic's move to soul music a decade later.) Staff arranger Jesse Stone could not quite re-create the earthy New Orleans sound with Atlantic's more sophisticated and jazz-oriented group of New York sessionmen, but in the process of trying he created the polished grit of the "Atlantic Sound," which supported all of the label's singers with great, boogie-based sax-led band arrangements that were an integral part of the song rather than afterthoughts or mere accompaniments to the vocals.

The biggest stars of Atlantic's early years were Ruth Brown and Joe Turner, along with two vocal groups—the Clovers and the first incarnation of the durable Drifters—who were a link between the adult pop of the Ink Spots and the streetcorner sounds of doo-wop.

Ruth Brown

Ruth Brown was the flagship artist of Atlantic's early years—important enough to the label's success that some took to calling Atlantic the "House that Ruth Built." The twenty-year-old "Miss Rhythm" was signed by Atlantic in 1948 and began her string of 24 R&B hits with "So Long" in 1949, after injuries from a car wreck had delayed her debut by nearly a year. One of the great singers of her era, Brown bridged the gap

between blues and R&B, mixing blues shouts, sultry pouts and a wide range of dramatic inflections, including the signature "squeaks" that sounded both cute and sexy.

Brown's "**Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean**" was a big R&B hit for Atlantic in 1953 and was among the early rumblings of records penetrating the white teen consciousness with its earthy beat and sound. Again, the year's "Dog" songs provide a good context for comparison. "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean" was raw and earthy indeed compared to "Doggie in the Window." Ruth Brown had everything Patti Page seemed to lack: a gutsy voice, a tough sound and beat behind her and a song that actually deserved some emotional involvement. On the other hand, compared to the deep blues growl of "Hound Dog," Brown's jazzy backing, nuanced vocalisms and sassy knowing-wink delivery seemed positively urbane and sophisticated.

With Ruth Brown, Atlantic Records staked out a middle ground between pop and rhythm & blues, blending the polish of jazz and pop with the rough emotion of R&B. Her subsequent Atlantic hits included "Teardrops from My Eyes," "5-10-15 Hours" and "Wild, Wild Young Men" and other great songs that were, unfortunately, still too R&B-oriented for the general pop market and too "adult" for the emerging white teenage audience. The jazz band flavor of Brown's Atlantic recordings served her voice well but limited her appeal in the crossover era. Brown was never able to parlay her R&B success into a "rock & roll" career (unlike LaVern Baker, who came to Atlantic in 1953 and was positioned for the crossover market from the start). She finally did have a pair of minor pop hits later in the decade with "Lucky Lips" and "This Little Girl's Gone Rockin'," pop novelties that were fun but far removed from the sassy confidence her groundbreaking R&B hits.

Ruth Brown led a list of great female R&B singers who were unable to follow lesser voices into the riches of the pop world, including Big Mama Thornton (who recorded the original versions of both "Hound Dog" and Janis Joplin's hit "Ball & Chain"), Big Maybelle (who recorded "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On"), Faye Adams ("Shake a Hand") and the eclectic Dinah Washington, who was the most successful black female singer of the 1950's but was likewise unable appeal to the rock & roll audience.

Joe Turner

Big Joe Turner was similarly unable to reach the rock & roll market, even though he recorded a one of rock's early defining classics: "Shake, Rattle & Roll." Turner was born in 1911 in Kansas City, home of Benny Moten, Count Basie and the other great Kansas City bandleaders who put fire into jazz and made it swing. Turner and boogie-woogie pianist Pete Johnson were featured in the 1938 "Spirituals to Swing" concerts in Carnegie Hall, where their "Roll 'Em Pete" served as a rollicking invocation of the wide-open spirit of their hometown. Turner's combination of blues shouting with an upbeat boogie-woogie beat and spirit formed the basic equation of all R&B shouters, but Turner was not a star himself until signed to Atlantic in 1951 and produced "Chains of Love," "Honey Hush," "TV Mama" (featuring blues slide master Elmore James), "Shake, Rattle & Roll" and its musical twin, "Flip, Flop & Fly," and other blues-shout anthems.

"Shake, Rattle & Roll" was recorded in 1954 and was soon discovered by white teenagers who loved the song's big beat and singalong refrain and made a cult star out of the surprised 43-year-old Turner—for a few brief moments, that is, until Bill Haley & His Comets scored their first big hit with the song and completed its transformation to "rock

& roll." Joe Turner continued recording and performing and never lost his big, booming voice. He died of a heart attack in 1985 after a half-century career that put him at the birth of both rhythm & blues and rock & roll.

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[i]Arnold Shaw, "Honkers and Shouters" (New York: Macmillan, 1978), p. 74.
[ii]The indies were generally owned by white men, though a few were owned and operated by blacks, most notably Don Robey's Houston-based Peacock label , Vivian and James Bracken's Vee Jay Records, a Chicago rival of Chess Records, and of course Berry Gordy's Motown.
[iii]Shaw, "Honkers and Shouters."
[iv]Robert Palmer, "Deep Blues" (New York: Viking, 1981) p. 222.