CROSSOVERS AND COVERS

"One of the most meaningful developments in years on the music-record scene has been the mass acceptance of rhythm & blues—its emergence from narrow confines and its impact on the broad field of pop music... Notwithstanding the opposition of entrenched facets of the music business, this exciting form of musical expression, together with its notable body of artists, could not be relegated to a relatively unimportant niche.

"In the last analysis, it was, of course, the kid with the 89 cents in his pocket who cast the deciding vote. He considered the repertoire, listened to the imaginative arrangements of the artists and repertoire men, critically weighed the merits of the artists—and found them all good." (*Billboard* magazine, 1955)

"Work With Me Annie" caused a flurry of controversy reminiscent of the "Sixty Minute Man" scandal, though this time it was not possible to write off the record's success as a mere "fluke." 1954 was the Year of the Crossover, when it became apparent that the rhythm & blues "fad" had more force than any previous white infatuation with a black style. The success of "Crying in the Chapel" the previous year had opened the floodgates for a torrent of new songs from an unending spring of new groups inspired by the Orioles' success (as their generation of groups had been inspired by the Ink Spots). The popularity of songs like "Work With Me Annie" also showed that the groups no longer had to restrict themselves to ballads to reach beyond their R&B following. The young rock & roll fans liked their music with a beat and didn't mind a few suggestive lyrics either, or anything else that could make their parents mad. Still, as the makeup of both the audience and the groups grew younger, the music itself grew "younger" as well. The harsh edges, overt sexuality and adult attitudes of rhythm & blues began to soften and move in a more melodic and innocent pop direction with the new teenage audience in mind. (The pronounced gospel influence remained, however, and was even heightened by the move to more "idyllic" and beseeching love lyrics that were not far removed, in spirit, from religious songs and sentiment.)

"Gee"

The Crows 1954 hit "Gee" was one of the first signposts of the new direction. The record was actually released in 1953, but was not a hit until 1954, after a prominent disc jockey rescued the song from oblivion by playing it over and over on his show (not because he *liked* the song, mind you: his girlfriend had just left him and *she* liked the song, and he wanted her back).

"Gee" is yet another in the long list of "first rock songs," due to both its crossover success on the pop charts (it made it to #14) and to its young, happy sound and enthusiastic voices—an unadorned lead singer backed by a chanting singalong of rhythmic nonsense syllables that anyone could imitate in the locker room or on the streetcorner. The lyrics, too, were easy to relate to and could be sung without embarrassment, or at least without the type of embarrassment that a rendition of "Sixty Minute Man" or "Work With Me Annie" might engender. While those songs were great for a shared laugh and thrill, and certainly great for a shared dance, black groups became more successful in crossing over to the pop charts when their themes became younger and more universal. In other words, when idyllic LOVE returned as the focus once again.

Not that the parents (or the Ink Spots) would ever like a song like "Gee." However wholesome its values, it was still "trash" at best, but then the admiration and respect of the adult world was not the goal. Music that "the kids" could love and relate to was the goal, and a more innocent and idyllic view of love fit more easily into the experience of the young crossover market.

The music also reflected the changing times and tastes in a gradual move away from the jazz flavor and jump blues echoes of older R&B groups toward a simpler and more immediate style of instrumental backing. The arrangements thinned out to make way for the voices, and the instruments became almost unnecessary as the sax riffs, rhythmic bass lines and other instrumental features were taken over by the background singers, or "by the fellows who didn't get to sing lead and got tired of singing nothing but "aaaaah," as Barry Hansen put it.[1] Instead of "aaah" or "ooh," background singers turned to ever-more elaborate patterns of vocal sounds and rhythms that could create a strong beat and a full sound without conflicting with the lead singer's words or melody. Why bother with a saxophone when you have two or three background singers who are perfectly capable of singing "ooh-wah" or "dum-dee-dum"? Or "**doo-wop**," for that matter, the term that was later applied to the vocal group sound of the rock & roll era to distinguish it from the earlier and more adult-oriented styles of the R&B vocal groups.

"Sh-Boom"

"Gee" was just the beginning of a string of crossover hits for black groups in 1954. The Chords' "Sh-Boom" followed "Gee" up the charts in the Spring of 1954 and made it even higher, peaking at #5 on the pop charts—an astonishing showing for a black act. "Sh-Boom" is a good-natured uptempo song, much like "Gee" in spirit, driven by a spirited, scatting lead voice that yields to a deep "Mr. Bassman" interlude in the middle of the song, and by the chanted nonsense syllables that gave the song its name.

Actually, the version of "Sh-Boom" that *most* people heard was bland and corny and sounded like a barbershop quartet... That version was a **#1** pop hit for the Crew Cuts, a white group that recorded for Mercury Records, one of the industry giants that was starting to become alarmed by the quickening crossover pace. Working on the age-old pop assumption that the *Song* sold, not the Singer, Mercury decided to have the Crew Cuts record a pop version of an R&B hit. The idea was simple: jump on a newly-released song, record it and crush the original version with all the industry might that a major label had at its command—the vast distribution network, the publicity budget, the ties to important radio and television shows, the inside connections and favors owed...

First, of course, they had to find a song. Needless to say, "Work With Me Annie" would not do. The whole point was to make an R&B song palatable to all varieties of pop ears—to keep enough of the beat and feel of the original to satisfy the teenagers while cleaning up the sound, the singing and (if necessary) the lyrics enough to have it appeal to Mom and Dad as well. "Sh-Boom" fit the bill, and in short order the arrangers and producers at Mercury were able to remove everything that had made the Chords' version exciting and replace it with a bland, generic sound that *still* stood out enough to make it a hit but not enough to offend anyone (unlike the sore thumb the original seemed compared to "Doggie in the Window" or "The Yellow Rose of Texas"). On sheet music, the originals and covers would look the same: same melody, same tempo, same chords... The practice of covering highlighted all the intangibles—the feel, the emotion, the sheer

sound—that made rock & roll so special, so hard to contrive and hard to explain to anyone who just didn't get it.

Rock & Roll Under Covers

The success of the Crew Cuts' "**cover**" version of "Sh-Boom" set the pattern for the industry's response to the crossover trend: if you can't beat 'em, steal 'em. After all, if the gullible teenagers were going to listen to junk, they at least ought to listen to well-produced, politely sung versions of that junk that would earn profits for the respectable major labels rather than for some small "indie" that catered to that *other* audience and was responsible for the junk in the first place... Once it became clear that the R&B "fad" was not going to vanish anytime soon, the "entrenched facets of the music business" jumped on the covers bandwagon as a way to stop the hemorrhaging of their profits and audience.

In a way, the covers trend was simply an updated version of the music industry's response to the earlier ragtime, jazz, blues and boogie-woogie "fads," though on a much larger scale and with a faster response time and a more predatory attitude. "Covers" were nothing new, in any case: there had always been many different recordings of popular songs on the market (there were countless versions of "White Christmas," for example, though Bing Crosby's is best-remembered). And there were many earlier examples of covers reaching across stylistic boundaries, such as Woody Herman's anemic big band version of Louis Jordan's "Caldonia," or Tony Bennett's crooning take on Hank Williams' "Cold, Cold Heart."

The R&B covers of the 1950's were more malicious in nature, however, as they were competing for the same market and specifically trying to hijack the sales of current hits—trying to beat the originals to the pop market. To that end the major labels employed A&R men who monitored every release from every small indie label for any songs that might have pop appeal. The majors knew that the indies could not compete with their connections and clout, and that most radio listeners would never even *hear* the original versions of their covers, or even realize they *were* covers.

"Roll, er, Dance With Me Henry"

The originals were always better than the covers, and were always outsold by them.[ii] The pop charts of 1954 and 1955 were littered with stalled crossovers and undeserving hit covers. The McGuire Sisters, for example, rendered the Spaniels' "Goodnight, Sweetheart, Goodnight" and the Moonglows' "**Sincerely**" safe for young America, while the Fontane Sisters did the same to "**Hearts of Stone**," an R&B hit for the Charms (which was itself a "cover" of another black group, the Jewels). The uptempo "Hearts of Stone" and the elegant ballad "Sincerely" were both successful crossovers—the Charms went to #15 on the pop charts, the Moonglows to # 20—and interesting examples of the vocal group style at the midpoint between R&B and doo-wop. Such distinctions were obliterated, however, in the comically whitewashed cover versions, which both went to #1(!)

The Penguins' "**Earth Angel**" was the slow-dance flipside of "Gee" and the song that completed the transition from rhythm & blues earthiness to doo-wop innocence. The record remains one of rock's most beloved oldies, while the cover by the irritating Crew Cuts was forgotten long ago, though that is of little consolation to the Penguins, who never had another hit and had to watch the Crew Cuts sail past them up the pop charts with the one hit they could claim. (In a field littered with "one-hit wonders," most groups never recovered from having their one shot taken from them.) The Crew Cuts only climbed to #3 with "Earth Angel," however, since the McGuire Sisters' cover of "Sincerely" and Georgia Gibbs' cover of "Tweedlee Dee" were socked into the top two spots (an illustration of how prevalent the covers mania had become). Georgia Gibbs was even able to turn Etta James' risqué "Roll With Me Henry" into an innocuous and laughably asexual toe-tapper called "Dance With Me Henry."

And then there was **Pat Boone**, the King of the Covers, who launched his wholesome career in 1955 with "Two Hearts," an R&B hit for the ever-reliable Charms, then hit #1 on the pop charts with "Ain't That A Shame," a dreary cover of the great Fats Domino's first crossover hit. He followed with the El Dorados' "At My Front Door," then completed his one-two punch with a cover of Little Richard's first hit, "Tutti Frutti." (Little Richard later recalled that he wanted to "find and kill" Pat Boone when he heard Boone's polite cover of his gloriously unrestrained song.) In his defense, Pat Boone brought at least a watered-down version of rock & roll to a wide audience—at least the entire nation *heard* "Tutti Frutti," and many were then a little more open to the real thing when it finally came their way. Anyway, it's hard to judge Pat Boone too harshly. After all, who would ever think that a <u>white</u> singer really *could* sing rock & roll?

BILL HALEY & HIS COMETS

Bill Haley didn't "invent rock & roll" any more than Columbus "discovered America," but he *was* the first white artist to play it well and "**Rock Around the Clock**" *was* the first rock & roll hit of any color to go to #1 on the pop charts. This was no cover: it was a song written for Haley and *about* rock & roll, and was clearly aimed right at the crossover market with a big dance beat and no references to any world bigger than or beyond the sock hop. The success of "Rock Around the Clock" confirmed the existence of an audience of teenagers (adults certainly didn't buy it) far bigger than even the biggest crossover successes had hinted at—teenagers who found their voice and an expression of their world in rock & roll.

Best of all, it paved the way for the cataclysmic arrival of Elvis Presley on RCA in 1956, which ended the era of the crossovers and covers by rendering each concept obsolete. Elvis sealed rock's triumph and also ushered in a new level of acceptance of the black originators like Little Richard, whose "Long Tall Sally" was the first rock & roll single to hit the charts after Elvis' arrival. Little Richard's original outsold Pat Boone's cover: the reign of the cover songs had ended. Once rock & roll *defined* the market, it was ludicrous to call Little Richard a "crossover," and foolhardy to attempt a "cover" when the kids wanted real rock & roll.

It is the fate of Bill Haley, who liked to call himself the "Father of Rock & Roll," to be always remembered as a mere prelude to Elvis, the *real* white rocker. Of course, there shouldn't have been a need for a "white rocker" to begin with. Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Fats Domino, Bo Diddley and the other great *black* rockers who debuted in 1955 were certainly exciting enough. But the realities of both American society and the music industry dictated otherwise, and assured that the black acts would remain "crossovers" and rock & roll would remain a "fad" and that it would all continue to be swept away by polite covers until the danger had passed. Only a white star of enormous magnitude could give rock & roll access to the mainstream. No one expected or imagined an Elvis, of course, and there might not have *been* an "Elvis" if Bill Haley hadn't proven that such a thing was possible: that a white singer could really capture the sound and feel of rhythm & blues—that a white artists could really play rock & roll. In the light of the harsh realities of the times, "Rock Around the Clock" was a crucial watershed point, and the subsequent arrival of Elvis Presley a nearly miraculous instance of perfect timing.

Shake, Rattle & Roll

Bill Haley & His Saddleman were a small-time western swing combo from Chester, Pennsylvania, when their leader fell under the spell of Louis Jordan and began to reshape their music to accommodate the influence of Jordan's jump blues. Their 1951 recording of "Rocket 88" and subsequent covers of R&B songs were far ahead of their time, in concept if not in music. Renamed Bill Haley & His Comets, they recorded the first white rock & roll hit, "Crazy Man Crazy," in 1953, then joined with Decca Records and producer Milt Gabler and had a Top Ten hit with a cover of "Shake, Rattle & Roll" the following year.

A comparison of Bill Haley & the Comets' version of "Shake, Rattle & Roll" with Joe Turner's original reveals all of the damnable offenses that covers usually perpetrated on their hapless prey. For a start, the lyrics were "cleaned up" and de-sexed (no

references to the "sun shinin' through dresses" or the "Devil in nylon hose" in Haley's cover—even the reference to the "bed" at the beginning of Turner's original was deleted); the arrangement was similarly cleaned and polished into a bright and cheery pop sound with clearly-sung melodies that are miles away from Turner's bluesy adult shout; the beat was cleaned and brightened as well, moved from booming lows to a brittle high-end of snare and cymbals, while the song itself was reshaped to allow the singalong title refrain—the "hook"—to appear earlier and more often in order to penetrate the attention span of Haley's teenage audience... And *that* was the difference between Haley and all previous cover artists: Haley loved rhythm & blues and his version was aimed directly at the the rock & roll market, not at appeasing Mom and Dad, and his goal was to retain and hopefully increase the excitement of the original rather than gloss it over. Haley kept the beat big, strong and danceable and kept the energy level high in a way the Crew Cuts could never even have attempted.

See You Later, Alligator!

Bill Haley & the Comets recorded "Rock Around the Clock" before "Shake, Rattle & Roll," but they had to wait until 1955 for *Blackboard Jungle* to turn the forgotten B-side into the battlecry of a new generation. "Rock Around the Clock" made Haley the biggest star in popular music, but he never had another hit that even approached its impact. "See You Later, Alligator," a #6 hit in 1956, was his last big hit. The record is a fun fifties period piece, but it also a good example of the type of post-jump blues arrangements and strained "dig it, daddy-o" hepster image he used to try to stay "in" with a style and a generation that he really wasn't a part of. Haley was old—nearly 30!—and married with children by the time "Rock Around the Clock" became a hit, and he looked it, with a dumb spit curl on his forehead and the Comets' tacky matching outfits and a showbiz smile that seemed exciting until kids got a glimpse of Elvis' sneer.

Declining sales and fortunes at home led Bill Haley & His Comets to embark on a famous tour of England in 1957. His visit was the first from a real American rock & roll star, and the fans were in a frenzied state of anticipation by the time Haley arrived. The frenzy escalated into full-scale riots at Haley's concerts, fueled by a surge of pent-up energy that was too much for the lightweight music and star too absorb. The British fans discovered what American teens already knew: Bill Haley, the Father of Rock & Roll, was a dork.

Bill Haley was definitely in the right place at the right time, but he was ultimately the wrong guy. He was what he seemed to be: a good entertainer who *performed* rock & roll. Elvis *lived* rock & roll, and was the genuine article while Haley was, in the end, an "authentic cover."

Haley simply didn't seem very exciting for very long, but the news that a white artist could play real rock & roll *was* exciting. Opening the pop market to black artists had created "rock & roll" and was one of its great triumphs; ironically, Haley's great triumph was opening up the rock & roll market for *white* artists. He confirmed that rhythm & blues *was* rock & roll, and then proved that rock & roll was "popular music" as well.

Bill Haley died bitter, paranoid and half-crazed in 1981 after many depressing years on the oldies circuit playing "Rock Around the Clock" until he hated the song. The

song was his Moment, however, and was the turning point for rock & roll and the dividing line between the past and present. Rock's roots led to and ended—and its future began—with "Rock Around the Clock." Haley had other hits, but none of them mattered. He may not have been the Father of Rock & Roll, but he was definitely the greatest of all "One-hit Wonders."

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[i]Barry Hansen, "Doo-Wop," in "The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll," ed. Jim Miller, rev. ed. (1976; rpt. New York: Random House, 1980), p. 83.

[ii] The original groups were usually left with little or nothing to show for their efforts, even if they had written the song to begin with. While cover versions had to give credit and pay royalties to the "songwriter," more often than not the groups sold the song's copyright—gladly—to the record label owners in exchange for the chance to make a record, and then received no songwriting royalties from either their own recording or the hit cover version. (The label owners didn't necessarily fare much better, since they often had to sell most of their stake in the song to a publisher in order to get it recorded by an established star.)