EARLY SIXTIES POP: WORST OF TIMES, BEST OF TIMES

The crash in Clear Lake came to symbolize the end of rock & roll's Golden Era. By the early sixties, *pop* ruled the airwaves and rock & roll seemed to belong to an era already past: a brief, exciting moment in the history of popular music and the hearts of a single generation of teenagers. 1959 saw the release of *Oldies But Goodies*,the first rock "oldies" album and the surest sign that an era had passed. As a new generation of teenyboppers emerged, their older brothers and sisters grew up and entered the adult world of steady jobs, families and folk music, and began talking about the "good old days" of Elvis and Jerry Lee. It seemed that "rock & roll," like Dixieland and Big Band music, was just a passing trend in the end. (Indeed, the term "rock & roll," in the strictest sense, is applied exclusively to the music of the fifties.)

A few years earlier, Pat Boone had lamented that teenagers would not have the type of "good music" that earlier generations could reminisce to: "... when I listen to the swinging music of the 30's and 40's, to Tex Beneke, Glenn Miller, the Dorsey Brothers, I wonder how we're going to feel in ten years when we say, 'Listen dear, they're playing our song,' and in the background we hear 'Hound Dog' or 'Tutti Frutti'!"[i] But it *was* happening: rock & roll was already slipping into a nostalgia haze, with its own nostalgic "classics" that could turn rapidly aging young adults into misty-eyed teenagers once again. Pat Boone's always-questionable tastes aside, "In the Mood" and "Stardust" had nothing on "Earth Angel," or "Tutti Frutti," for that matter!

Whatever the fate of rock's past, it suddenly looked a lot better than its present. The early sixties were populated by an alarming number of cleancut entertainers singing odes to "Puppy Love," lunchboxes and good citizenship. The Melody replaced the Beat as the focus of the music, and the liberating energy of rock & roll all but disappeared into the bland conformity of wholesome entertainment. Although there was actually plenty of good music still being made, it was getting harder to find. In terms of sales and exposure, the early sixties were dominated by teen-oriented fluff, written in assembly line fashion by professional songwriters, sung by handsome "teen idols" with little discernible talent, and plugged mercilessly by the music industry on Top Forty radio and *American Bandstand*. Rebellious rock & roll had become harmless pop.

The "Death" of Rock & Roll

Rock's "death" happened as gradually, and then seemed as sudden, as its explosive birth. Of the many factors that contributed to rock's decline, the loss of the Founding Fathers was the most dramatic: Buddy Holly dead, Eddie Cochran dead, Elvis in the Army (then, even worse, Hollywood), Little Richard in Bible school, Jerry Lee Lewis blacklisted, Chuck Berry on his way to jail... A wholesale massacre. Aside from the newly respectable Elvis, only the Everly Brothers and, to a lesser extent, Fats Domino were still recording hits in the early sixties, and they had *always* been harmless and respectable.

Rock & roll needed unifying leaders who could challenge the established order and keep things exciting, but no such figures emerged again until the Beatles launched rock's Renaissance in 1964. Jerry Lee Lewis offered the best diagnosis of the disease and its eventual cure: "All you could hear was Bobby: Bobby Vee, Bobby Vinton, Bobby Denton, Bobby Rydell, Bobby Darin... There was nothing but Bobbies on the radio.

Thank God for the Beatles... Cut them down like wheat before the sickle."[ii] In the meantime, however, the void left by the departed giants was filled by tepid, industry-approved entertainers and the charts became as predictable as the movies the former King of Rock & Roll was churning out. The status quo was back in force and the lessons of Jerry Lee, Chuck Berry and other victims of the backlash against rock & roll inspired career-conscious artists to adopt more wholesome images and record songs that couldn't possibly offend anyone. With any luck, you could end up like Bobby Darin, an "all-around entertainer" playing Caesar's Palace, the Copacabana and other respectable venues that wouldn't let Little Richard wash their dishes. As Bobby Rydell put it, "if you ask me my ambition, careerwise, that's easy—I want to grow up to be an all-round entertainer, like Sinatra."[iii]

The rock & roll explosion had forced the music industry, which treasures nothing above a profitable predictability, into the uncomfortable position of *responding* to rather than dictating popular taste. Originally the product of Outsiders (blacks and "hillbillies") recording in renegade studios for small independent record labels, rock & roll moved into the mainstream with the huge success of Elvis at RCA. Once it was clear that rock & roll wasn't going to be a "passing fad," and that there was a *lot* of money to be made from it, the music industry swooped down with a vengeance and began smoothing over rock's big beat, rough edges and regional accents. The process was completed in the early sixties, when rock & roll was finally forced to make sense within the tradition and commercial framework of popular music.

The top selling songs for the years 1955 through 1960 chronicle the return to normalcy with depressing clarity: 1955/"Rock Around the Clock" (Bill Haley); 1956/"Don't Be Cruel" (Elvis); 1957/"All Shook Up" (Elvis); 1958/"Volare" (Domenico Modungo); 1959/"Mack the Knife" (Bobby Darin); 1960/"Theme from *A Summer Place*" (The Percy Faith Orchestra). Bobby Lewis' dance classic "Tossin' and Turnin'" topped 1961, but it was closely followed by the Highwaymen's "Michael Row the Boat Ashore" and Lawrence Welk's(!) "Calcutta." Things really were looking bleak.

Rock had come full circle back to the bland pop that it had originally rebelled against, though with one major difference: rock & roll had demonstrated the enormous buying power of American teenager, and most of the music was still crafted with that audience in mind. The beat was softened but still danceable, the lyrics were pasteurized but still aimed specifically at the "youngsters," and the arrangements still used "traditional" rock instruments (though now often sweetened by strings and background choirs). In fact, the audience was growing even younger. Impressionable pubescent girls became the target audience, and the nation of juvenile delinquents that rock haters predicted seemed to have vanished with Elvis' sideburns on the floor of the Army Induction Center. For the most part, Young America bought what it was sold: polite music by dreamy singers who looked sort of like Elvis but *never* moved their hips when they sang...

The "Teen Idols" & the Payola Scandal

The night after the Clear Lake crash, a local teenager named Bobby Velline was chosen to sing a tribute to Buddy Holly in Fargo, North Dakota, the tour's next stop. Velline used his Holly-esque voice as a springboard to stardom as Bobby Vee, one of the more talented of teen idols ("Take Good Care of My Baby," "Run to Him," "The Night

Has a Thousand Eyes"). Teen idols Frankie Avalon and Jimmy Clanton were then called in to replace the fallen stars and finish the tour. It was truly a crossing of the times: "teen idols" dominated the pop charts in the early sixties with a watered-down version of Holly's melodic pop that lacked his sense of irony and his link to rock & roll's country and R&B roots.[iv]

The most successful of the teen idols was Bobby Vinton, who had three pre-Beatle #1 hits with "Roses Are Red (My Love)," "Blue Velvet," and "There! I've Said It Again," which was, in fact, the *last* pre-Beatle #1, knocked off by "I Want to Hold Your Hand." Vinton scored a final chart-topper in 1964 with "Mr. Lonely," but managed to keep his career alive longer than most of the ex-idols, stretching his string of hits all the way to 1975's "Beer Barrel Polka"(!) Vinton had a good, smooth voice and picked material that suited it well and appealed to a wide audience. In fact, a lot of parents found that they could now, for the first time in ages, actually *enjoy* some of their kids' records, as sound of rock & roll was submerged further into the mainstream pop stylings anticipated by Pat Boone, Paul Anka, Bobby Darin... and Perry Como. For better or worse, "Venus" and "Blue Velvet" were a *long* way from "Not Fade Away."

Philadelphia and *American Bandstand*

Philadelphia was the most successful teen idol "machine." The city that had turned doo-wop into a formula with Danny & the Juniors now spawned Frankie Avalon ("Venus," "Why"), Fabian ("Turn Me Loose," "Tiger"), Bobby Rydell ("We Got Love," "Wild One") and the once promising Freddy Cannon, who reflected the changing times with his shift from rockabilly of 1959's "Tallahassie Lassie" to pop of 1962's "Palisades Park." The Philadelphia idols created the stereotype of the neatly packaged pretty face, pulled from a streetcorner and groomed for instant success. The hub of the Philadelphia scene, and the engine of the idol machine, was the *American Bandstand* television show, which gave the singers—and new dance crazes like the Twist—a weekly showcase and national audience.

American Bandstand began as a locally televised Philadelphia dance party in 1952 and was picked up nationally by ABC in 1957. An appearance on *American Bandstand* virtually guaranteed a hit record, and **Dick Clark**, the show's host, soon eclipsed Alan Freed as rock's most powerful career-maker. Clark loved rock & roll and booked most of the original rockers on his shows, but he was also mindful of the sensibilities of the advertisers who kept *Bandstand* on the air and the parents who allowed their kids to watch it. As rock & roll's audience widened and the pressure to "clean it up" increased, Clark leaned toward wholesome singers who would appeal to the greatest number and broadest age range of viewers. The television format was well-suited for entertainers more handsome than talented, and was ideal for the teen idols, who could lip-synch their hits and worry about smiling rather than singing. In the late fifties and early sixties, Clark opened the *Bandstand* stage to a succession of teen idols, making overnight stars out of several local Philadelphia teenagers.

American Bandstand gave the singers invaluable exposure and they, in turn, were good for the show's wholesome image—and good for Dick Clark's personal finances as well, since he had a financial interest in many of the record labels and publishing houses connected to the singers he plugged on his show. It was simply a matter of good business sense on Clark's part, and he was certainly not alone: such arrangements were common

amidst the intricate web of business partnerships and career brokering that formed the heart of the music business. This type of conflict of interest was the high-tech end of the widespread practice known as "payola," which ranged from giving paper bags full of cash to DJ's in exchange for airplay (often the only way a small record label could compete with the media giants) to awarding songwriting credits to people who hadn't written a word or note (as in the case of Alan Freed's "co-authorship" of Chuck Berry's "Maybellene"). It was no secret that payola in its many forms was firmly entrenched in the music business. Indeed, many adults simply assumed that payola-grabbing DJ's and corrupt businessmen were the only possible explanation for anyone playing or buying "this junk."

In the wake of a scandal involving rigged TV quiz shows, the practice of payola in the music business came under scrutiny as a further example of rock & roll's corrupting influence. The **payola scandal** climaxed in a series of Congressional Hearings in 1960, fueled by the media-whipped outrage of the general public and by the indignation of music industry leaders tired of seeing their profits siphoned off by the indie record labels and other "fringe" elements responsible for most rock & roll. Dick Clark and Alan Freed, were singled out for special attention as rock's most visible frontmen. Clark managed to charm his way through the hearings by admitting to an unintentional conflict of interest and agreeing to divest his outside interests. He received a slap on the wrist (committee chairman Rep. Oren Harris called him a "fine young man") and resumed his successful career and played an important role in keeping rock on television in the pre-video sixties. Alan Freed, on the other hand, lacked Clark's boyish charm and wholesome image. His role in championing black music was not forgotten (nor kindly remembered), and his reputation had been recently clouded further by a few well-publicized "riots" at the racially mixed concerts he promoted. Freed refused to attempt a whitewash or deny that he participated in what was simply standard practice in the recording industry. His career was ruined by the payola scandal: he was forced off the air and died a bitter, broken 43-year-old man in 1965, a last casualty of the war against the music he loved—the music he named "rock & roll."

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[i]Pat Boone, "Between You, Me and the Gatepost," (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1960), p. 135.
[ii]Tony Palmer, "All You Need Is Love," (1976; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1977).
[iii]Ian Whitcomb, "Whole Lotta Shakin'," (London: Arrow, 1982).
[iv]For two of the more blatant examples (ripoffs) of Holly's influence, listen to Bobby Vee's "Rubber Ball" or Tommy Roe's "Sheila." Roe returned later in the decade with a series of hits ("Sweet Pea," "Hooray for Hazel," "Dizzy") that were derisively labeled "bubblegum music." Although the term wasn't around at the time, the early 1960's could certainly be called the "bubblegum era."