ROCK ROOTS

Since colonial days and the tragedy of slavery, white and black Americans have viewed each other with a mixture of fear and fascination—so close and yet so far apart. The slaves arriving from Africa brought along a world view and set of customs radically different from those of the European settlers, a difference clearly heard and felt in the hypnotic rhythms of the music that accompanied the slaves' daily life. Plantation owners were so worried about the messages that might be encoded in those "jungle rhythms" that drumming was often forbidden and a close and nervous watch was maintained on the slaves' mournful work songs, eerie chants, frenzied dancing and other mysterious means of communication that seemed so threatening and yet, at the same time, so strangely alluring.[i]

Alluring enough, in fact, that by the 19th century white entertainers were blackening their faces with burnt cork and performing caricatures of the slaves' songs and dances in "minstrel" shows. Meanwhile, the slaves were adapting to their new surroundings and incorporating white styles and customs, though not without a certain measure of bemused mockery. The "cakewalk," for example, started as a comically exaggerated promenade that ridiculed the slave owners' stilted manner and pompous gentility. Fascinated by the strange dance, and oblivious to the irony, white dancers mimicked the parody of their own movements and the cakewalk became a minstrel show staple and a full-blown dance craze in the ragtime era. Variations on the cakewalk scenario were replayed with the Fox-trot, Charleston, Black Bottom, Jitterbug, Twist and all the other dance steps fueled by an infatuation with the African-derived rhythms of ragtime, jazz, boogie-woogie, swing, rhythm & blues, rock & roll, soul, funk, disco, rap...

By the time Elvis led a band of crazed rebels into the pop charts, everything and nothing had changed—so close and yet still so far apart. The rising popularity of black rhythm & blues, now dubbed "rock & roll," among white teenagers had created a new generation of drum-fearing white folks, now called "parents," who listened with alarm to the strange, hypnotic rhythms and coded messages ("a-wop bop a lu bop"?!) that were driving their children into fits of uncontrolled frenzy and irresponsible behavior. To thwart this menace, or at least cash in on it, Pat Boone and his clean-cut compatriots donned musical blackface and performed pasteurized caricatures, now called "covers," of black music on modern-day minstrel shows. Further south, a more daring and freewheeling bunch of "rockabillies" inherited their ancestors' forbidden fascination with black music and culture and added their own feverish determination to find that spark in themselves.

Musical boundaries—and a good many racial and cultural boundaries—crumbled around rock & roll. The music was a varied and fascinating hybrid of styles, shaped by Elvis and the rockabillies' mixture of country and blues, Chuck Berry's mix of blues and a comic "hillbilly" style, Little Richard's manic marriage of gospel shrieks and rhythm & blues, Fats Domino's musical New Orleans gumbo, Buddy Holly's blend of pop and rock, the Everly Brothers' polite country rock and the various shadings of gospel, R&B and pop blended into "soul" by Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson and James Brown. Although its days as a liberating threat to the moral fabric of our society were relatively short-lived, rock & roll's blend of black and white redefined the meaning of and audience for "popular music." (And just when it seemed that the danger had passed, a bunch of

British kids churned it all up again, with yet another unexpected twist.) The vitality of American music, like America itself, has always reflected the rough edges and incredible variety of its cultural melting pot, and nowhere have these central tensions and undercurrents more fully confronted and transformed each other than in that startling music called "rock & roll."

"Rock Around the Clock"

Asked to identify the "first rock & roll song," most people tend to think of Bill Haley's 1955 hit, "Rock Around the Clock." They are at least partly right: "Rock Around the Clock" *was* the first rock & roll song to go to #1 on the *Billboard* pop charts, making rock & roll a fact that the music industry could no longer ignore or try to whitewash away. "Rock Around the Clock" was a call to arms and to the dance floor: to "rock! rock! rock! till the broad daylight!" It was the first celebration of rock & roll itself, and though it may sound merely quaint today, it punctured a hole in the smug conformity of the 1950's and seemed like a thrilling act of open defiance from the Paul Revere of the Rock Revolution.

"Rock Around the Clock" was released in 1954 but became a hit the following year when it was blasted over the opening and closing credits of *The Blackboard Jungle*, a movie about teenage delinquency and the clash of generations in an urban classroom. A key scene of that movie shows a group of troublemakers smashing a teacher's collection of classic jazz 78's, mocking his beloved Bix Beiderbecke and demanding some Sinatra and Joni James(!) Before rock & roll, there was no "teenage" music and, for that matter, no clear cultural definition of a "teenager." Although the scene captures the kids' contempt for authority and tradition, the musical "battle" rings a little hollow. Like James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*, the teenagers in *The Blackboard Jungle* are in full rebellion, though with no particular focus beyond their own inner turmoil and their rage at their stifling environment. Had the movie been made just a year or two later, "Sinatra" would have been replaced by "Elvis" and the *cause* would have been clear: the raucous rhythms of rock & roll. As it was, "Rock Around the Clock" was added as an afterthought, but the song made the rebellion explicit and millions of kids took their cue and chimed in with their own impromptu versions of their new anthem in hallways and on street corners around the country—particularly in the cities, where this new "urban folk music" struck its initial chord.

"Rock Around the Clock" was indeed a landmark, but it was certainly not—by any just measure—the "first rock song": it was the first important *white* rock song, a crucial distinction given the racial climate of America in the 1950's. Although no single song could fully claim the honor, there are plenty of legitimate "first rock song" contenders: the Crow's "Gee," the Midnighter's "Work with Me Annie," the Penguin's "Earth Angel" and the Chord's "Sh-Boom" (all from 1954); the Orioles' "Crying in the Chapel" and Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog" (from 1953); the Dominoes' "Have Mercy Baby" and Lloyd Price's "Lawdy Miss Clawdy" (from 1952); Jackie Brenston & the Ike Turner Band's "Rocket 88" and the Dominoes' "Sixty Minute Man" (from 1951); Cecil Gant's "We're Gonna Rock," and any number of other rhythm & blues records that pre-date "Rock Around the Clock," including Goree Carter's "Rock Awhile" (1949), Roy Brown's "Good Rockin' Tonight" (1947), Wild Bill Moore's "We're Gonna Rock, We're Gonna Roll" (1947), and the many blues and boogie numbers with strong dance beats

and references to "rocking" and "rolling" in their titles and lyrics. One could even trace it all the way back to songs like Trixie Smith's "My Man Rocks Me (With One Steady Roll)," from 1922, since "rock" had long been a euphemism for sex, partying and raucous music making.

Rock's roots run deep into the folk and popular music's of 20th century American (and much deeper still if one traces its sources back to African and European headwaters). Country & western, boogie-woogie, gospel, jazz, swing and pop all played a significant role in rock's development, along with the later stimuli reflected in Bob Dylan's folk-rock and beat poetry, the Beatles' excursions into classical music and Indian ragas, the psychedelic embrace of the avant-garde, and all the other far-flung inspirations that rock came to claim as its own. In the beginning, though, "rock & roll" was just another name for rhythm & blues, and the journey back to its origins is a direct shot back to the South and to the blues.

[i]The fervored, rhythmic "ring shouts" and other African-derived means of expressing religious fervor were equally unsettling. The plantation owners felt less threatened by the devout spirituals the slaves began singing as they adopted more melodic, European-derived styles, though they *would* have worried had they been aware of the "secret messages" that inspired an extra measure of emotion here as well. "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" ("... comin' for to carry me home"), for example, was a coded reference to Harriet Tubman and underground railroad, and "home" could be read as both deliverance to heaven and deliverance to freedom in the North.