

## ROCK STYLES EXPAND: THE PUSH TOWARD POP

A second wave of rock performers appeared in 1957, the year after Elvis' triumphant assault on the mainstream. Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochran, the Everly Brothers and Ricky Nelson were the most prominent of the year's new rock arrivals. (Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson also had their first pop hits in 1957, reflecting the push from R&B towards soul.) Jerry Lee was the final defiant shout of rock's rebellious origins, all those months ago, while the others pointed toward a more innocent and melodic brand of rock & roll—toward a new definition of "pop."

The late fifties were a transitional period between the initial explosion of rock & roll and the rather dismal "teen idol" era of the early sixties. The success of Elvis at RCA brought rock & roll to a much wider audience and increased its profitability to a point where even the music industry leaders had to take notice. (Not that they ever developed a taste for rock & roll: the kindest thing Mitch Miller, A&R man for Columbia Records, could say was "it's not music, it's a disease.") The cautious and conservative music industry approached rock & roll as a product to be sold to the largest possible audience while offending as few people as possible. The days of the Jerry Lee Lewises—and Lewis himself—were numbered.

The other newcomers, by contrast, had clean-cut images that blunted criticism and broadened their appeal. They appeared to be the kind of boys you could bring home for dinner without unduly alarming your parents (though Eddie Cochran could be rather sullen, in good Elvis fashion). They even made *records* you could play for your parents with little embarrassment: they'd still hate them, of course, but at least the overtly rebellious and sexual overtones were fading, replaced by innocent lyrics and a new emphasis on melodic "hooks" and hummable tunes. The beat, excitement and vitality weren't gone, however—not yet. To varying degrees, the Everly Brothers, Ricky Nelson, Eddie Cochran and, especially, Buddy Holly combined the beat and energy of rock & roll with the lyricism and inventiveness of pop in the last creative surge of rock & roll's Golden Era.

### Class of '57

In contrast to the career flameout of Jerry Lee Lewis and the short-lived success of most other early rockers, the Everly Brothers and Ricky Nelson managed to survive the change of decades, and the shifts in their sound and style roughly paralleled the overall shift from fifties rock & roll to early sixties pop. Although neither had ever been particularly wild or threatening, by the time they were crushed by the British Invasion their music had become, for the most part, overproduced and overly sentimental, lacking the focus and rock & roll grounding of their earlier work. (Much the same could be said of Fats Domino, the only other original rock voice whose career weathered the change of decades intact.)

Eddie Cochran and Buddy Holly both started as genuine rockabillies before crafting their own unique songwriting, guitar and production styles. They were certainly two of the most inventive and adaptable of the early rockers, and could well have given the pop world of the early sixties some much needed depth and energy. Instead, both died young and tragically—Holly at 22, Cochran at 21.

**Paul Anka** and **Bobby Darin** also hit in 1957 and, as two of the first pop "teen idols," were definitely harbingers of the future. Anka and Darin were never really committed to rock & roll, but they were talented singers and songwriters and were the most gifted of the teen idols. Anka's "Diana" went to #1 in 1957, when he was fifteen; his other Young Love ballads included "Puppy Love" (his ode to Mouseketeer Annette Funicello), "Lonely Boy" and "Put Your Head On My Shoulder." Darin scored teen hits like "Splish Splash," "Queen of the Hop" and "Dream Lover" before hitting the mainstream in 1959 with "Mack the Knife." Anka and Darin were both able to parlay their success in the rock market into careers as nightclub singers and "all-around entertainers," abandoning the teen audience in favor of the adult market that better reflected their tastes and talent. Their move "uptown" came to represent the ultimate success for the teen idols, who generally viewed their pop fame as a stepping stone to "respectable" careers in the nightclubs, variety shows, Vegas and Hollywood.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup>Anka returned to the charts (and enraged feminists) in 1974 with "(You're) Having My Baby," and also wrote many hits for others, including "It Doesn't Matter Anymore" for Buddy Holly, "My Way" for Frank Sinatra and Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* theme music. Bobby Darin surfaced as a quasi-folksinger after a mid-sixties career slump and a severe identity crisis. His hit version of Tim Hardin's "If I Were a Carpenter" revived his career, but Darin died during heart surgery in 1973 at the age of 37.