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# Early Moments in Rock Music History



Written by Amy Weber

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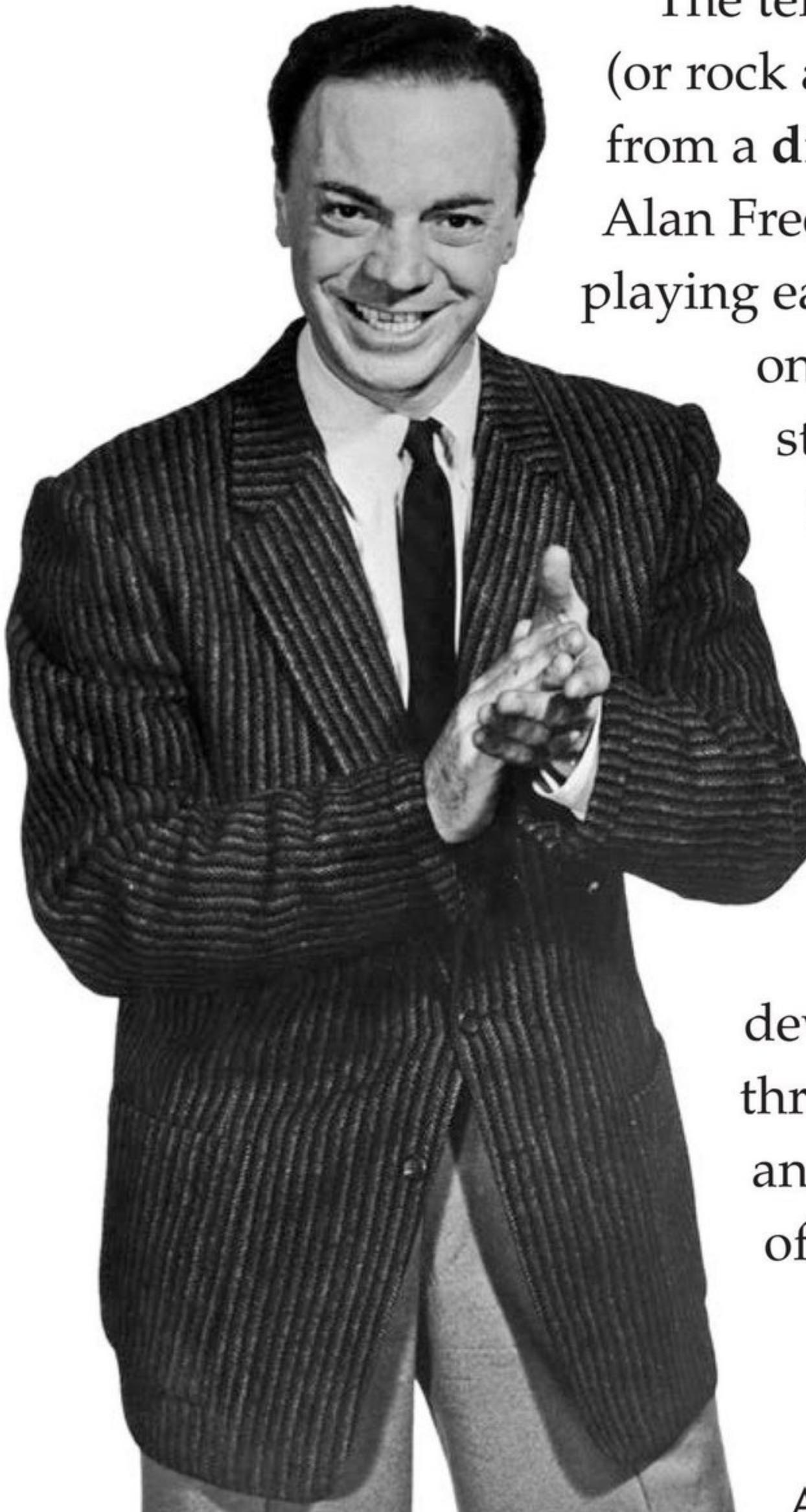
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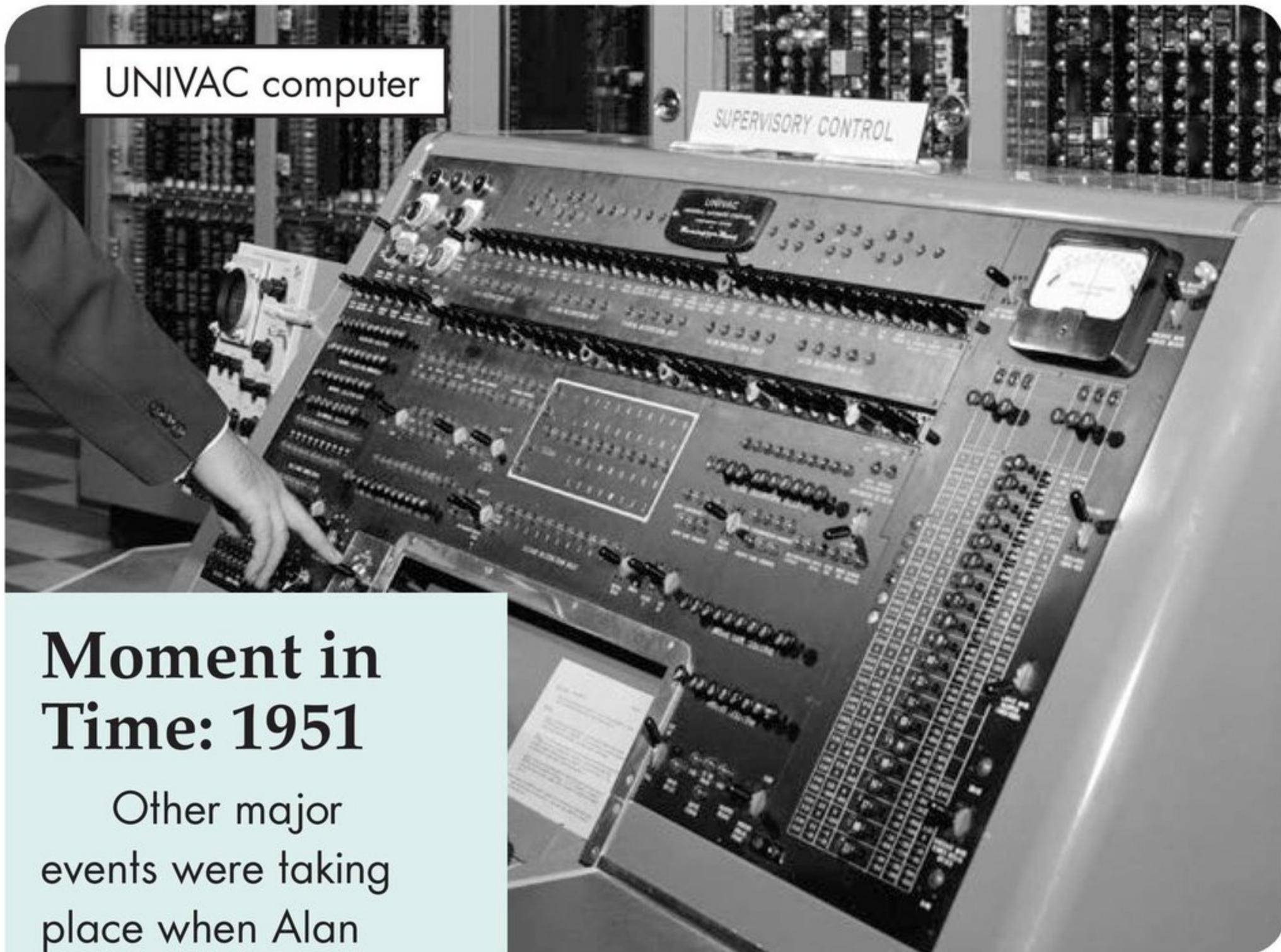
## Introduction

You may like listening or dancing to rock music. You may have even attended a rock concert. But do you know where rock music came from? Do you know when it started? Do you know that it was first called rock 'n' roll?



The term "rock 'n' roll" (or rock and roll) came from a **disc jockey** named Alan Freed, who started playing early rock music on a Cleveland radio station beginning in 1951. But the musical **genre** that rock 'n' roll identifies was not discovered or invented by Freed. It developed over time through the **influence** and **contributions** of many musicians.

Alan Freed



## Moment in Time: 1951

Other major events were taking place when Alan Freed started playing rock 'n' roll music. In that same year, China took over Tibet, the first color television was made, and the first commercial computer, called the UNIVAC, was built. The UNIVAC computer was so large that it filled the space of a small room! Research on your own to find out what else was taking place around the world in 1951.



Early color television

## Audience

Teenagers were the primary audience of rock 'n' roll music. During the 1950s, teens were usually portrayed in wholesome ways through television shows like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver*. But some teenagers of the 1950s generation identified more and more

with the character James Dean played in the film *Rebel Without a Cause*. Teenagers started challenging the **authority** of parents and **institutions**. Changes in society gave them more opportunities to do this.



James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*

Many of the rock 'n' roll artists that teens were listening

to were teenagers themselves or only slightly older. The **lyrics** of the rock 'n' roll songs reflected the generation's feelings and attitudes. Parents did not understand these rapidly changing times, which contrasted with the more serious times they had experienced growing up.

# Technology

## Records

Unlike today, in the early days of rock 'n' roll there was no such thing as a compact disc (CD) or an MP3 file. So, rock 'n' roll and other music was recorded on vinyl discs called records. The two most common kinds of vinyl records were LPs and 45s.



LP vinyl record

The long-playing (LP) record is more than twice the size of a CD. The most common LP was 12 inches in diameter and had about 30 minutes of recorded music.

To play an LP, you needed a **phonograph** (record player).

A turntable would spin an LP at a speed of  $33\frac{1}{3}$  revolutions per minute (RPM).

Forty-fives were smaller records that were about 7 inches in diameter. They had room for only about 4 minutes of music, or long enough for one song on each side of the record. These smaller records played at a speed of 45 RPM—that's why they were called "forty-fives."



Modern CD player



45 vinyl record



Sun Record Company's Memphis Recording Service studio in Memphis, Tennessee

Rock 'n' roll music was recorded in many studios that started up in the 1950s and continue to record music today. Sun Record Company is one of those recording studios. Its founder, Sam Phillips, discovered the talent of the singer who became known as the King of Rock and Roll, Elvis Presley. Phillips produced Elvis's first record, *That's All Right, Mama*.

Records, like CDs, moved from production to distribution to record shops and radio stations so they could be played over the airwaves. Teens could hear music on their phonographs at home, from a **jukebox** at their favorite diners, or from a disc jockey at a dance.

## *Radio*

Until 1954, nothing like today's portable music players existed. You couldn't (nor would you want to try to) carry around a phonograph or a home radio **console**. Radio consoles made for family living rooms were often as big as a piece of furniture. The invention of the **transistor** changed that. The transistor radio made it possible for teenagers to listen to rock 'n' roll music away from their parents. Teenagers could tune their own radios to the station of their choice. They no longer had to listen to their parents' music.



Pocket transistor radios were small enough to fit in a shirt pocket.



Home radio console



Portable MP3 player



By this time, radios had become standard equipment in automobiles as well. Teenagers lucky enough to get permission to borrow the family car, or to have a car of their own, drove to diners, drive-in movie theaters, beaches, and other places. These places became known as teenage **hangouts**. They played rock 'n' roll songs on their radios for everyone to hear.

The radio was also an inexpensive way to market records. As more teenagers heard songs on the radio, the more they liked them. They would go out to record stores and buy records they heard on the radio. As a result, record companies started paying radio stations to play the records that they most wanted to sell. Alan Freed, who dubbed the name rock 'n' roll, was a disc jockey at one of these radio stations.

## *Television*

Along with the transistor, other electronic inventions also helped rock 'n' roll music gain popularity. For decades, people had relied on the radio for news and music. Now, they had television. They could now see the news as well as other shows that included musical performances.

Television became a major means of spreading rock 'n' roll around the country and the world. TV programs like Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* (1957) became a big draw to teenagers. *Bandstand* featured teenagers dancing to Top 40 hits, or the 40 most popular songs based on current record sales. Another popular program was *The Ed Sullivan Show*, which featured live on-stage performances. *The Ed Sullivan Show* helped launch the careers of many rock 'n' roll musicians, such as Elvis Presley and the Beatles.



Ed Sullivan, left, and Elvis Presley chat before the show.

## *Electric Guitar*

In early rock 'n' roll music, guitarists played only **acoustic** guitars. They had to play them next to a microphone so that large audiences could hear the guitar's sound. But then Adolph Rickenbacker invented the electric guitar. The electric guitar was plugged into an amplifier, which used electricity to make the sound from the guitar louder. The electric guitar became popular and started being manufactured by companies such as Rickenbacker®, Fender®, and Gibson®. Together with a different drumming style (the backbeat), the electric guitar gave rock 'n' roll its most distinctive sound.



## Performers

So who played rock 'n' roll music? In the early days of rock 'n' roll, several white artists picked up rhythm and blues songs from black artists and remade them. Many black artists, such as Chuck Berry and Chubby Checker, became popular with both black and white audiences. Certainly, rhythm and blues was not the only genre of music that helped create rock 'n' roll. Others included boogie, Appalachian folk music, country and western, and gospel.



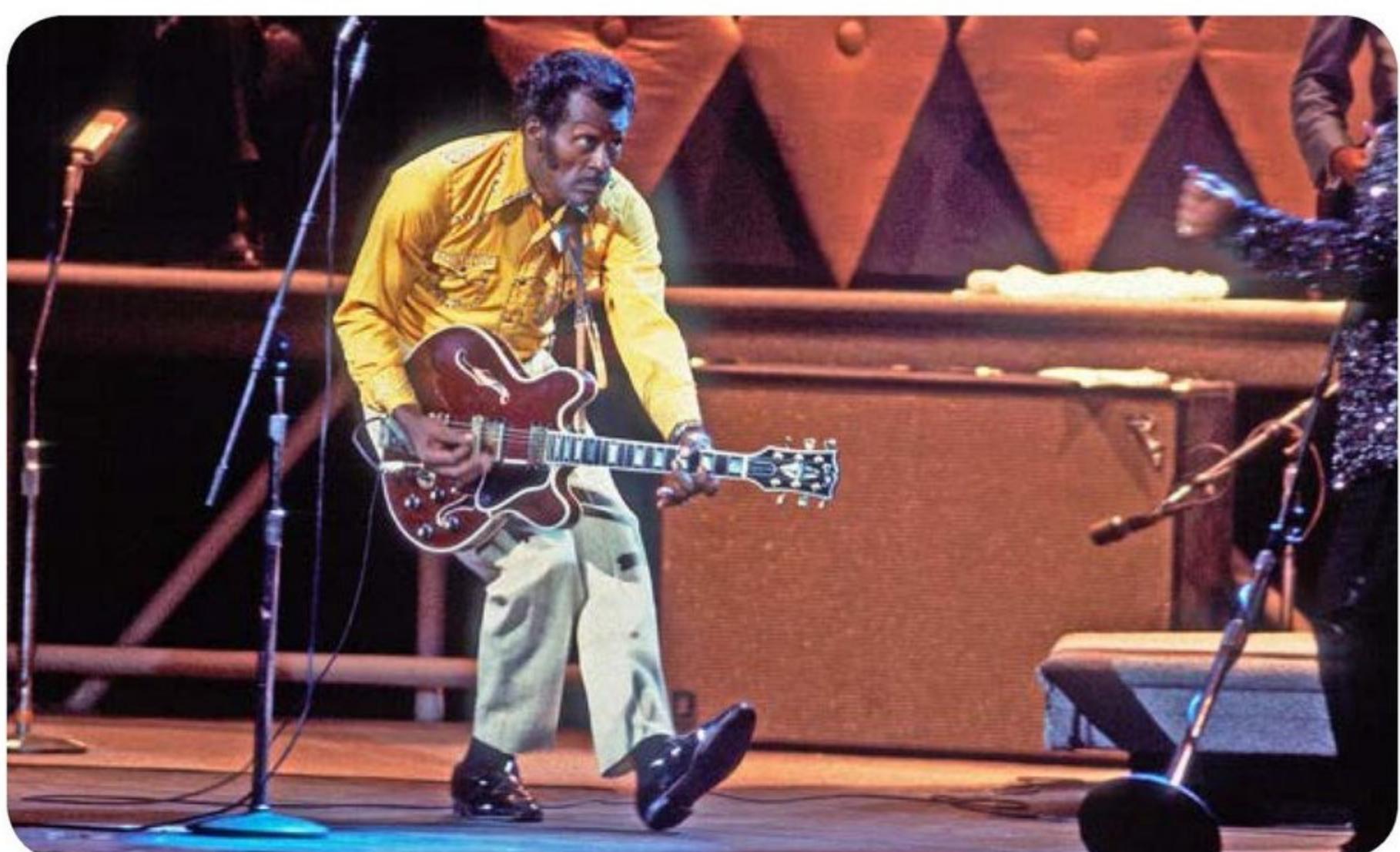
Singer Chubby Checker twists with a dance partner in London.

Many musicians also contributed to the birth and growth of rock 'n' roll. Some were piano players, while others were guitarists. Some were known as solo performers, while others were known as bands, and finally, some were American, while others were British. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio, honors people who have made significant contributions to rock 'n' roll.

## *Chuck Berry*

The first personality in the history of rock music is Chuck Berry. Charles Edward Berry was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1926. One of Berry's most well-known songs was *Johnny B. Goode* (1958). The lyrics of the song say that Johnny "never ever learned to read or write so well" but "he could play the guitar just like a ringing a bell" followed by the line "Go, go, go, Johnny go, go . . ."

Berry's guitar-playing style was a great influence in the development of the rock 'n' roll sound. He was radical in that he also introduced stage antics into his performances, like the famous "duck walk." Today, it is not uncommon to see rock musicians dance, jump, or leap across the stage while they perform.



Chuck Berry performs the "duck walk" in a 1986 performance.



## *Elvis Presley*

Elvis Presley is another important personality in the history of rock music. So important, in fact, that many have crowned him the “King of Rock and Roll.” Elvis impersonators mimic his right knee-jerking movement and his curled-up lip.

Elvis Aaron Presley was born in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1935. Presley played a type of music called **rockabilly**. Elvis is given credit by many for making rock ‘n’ roll so popular. Elvis became so popular that he made movies in which he would sing. That made rock ‘n’ roll music even more a part of popular culture.

## *Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens*

Buddy Holly was born in Lubbock, Texas, in 1936. He performed with a group named The Crickets. While Chuck Berry had his duck walk, and Elvis his jerky knee and curled lip, Holly had his **trademark**, too. He wore black-rimmed glasses and added an occasional hiccup to his singing. Holly is perhaps best known for the song *Peggy Sue* (1957), which talks about the relationship between a boy and a girl.



Buddy Holly

Ritchie Valens (Richard Valenzuela) was born in 1941 in Los Angeles, California. Even if you don't recognize his name, you might have heard his most well-known song—*La Bamba* (1958). The lyrics of this song, all in Spanish, originated in a cultural folk song to which Valens applied the rock 'n' roll sound.



Ritchie Valens

Although Valens and Holly made an impact on rock 'n' roll history, their careers ended abruptly. They died in a plane crash in 1959 on their way to a **gig** in Moorhead, Minnesota.

Of course, guitar players were not the only musicians who contributed greatly to early rock 'n' roll music; there were also piano players such as Little Richard (Richard Wayne Penniman) and Jerry Lee Lewis. Read about these and other major players in rock 'n' roll history at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame website at [www.rockhall.com](http://www.rockhall.com).



Little Richard performs in concert in 2004.

# Society

## Economics

So what was it about the 1950s that made rock 'n' roll music so popular? The United States **economy** was booming after World War II. New inventions had given people more time to enjoy things like television and radio. Teenagers did not have to work to earn money for their families.



'50s teenagers pick songs from a jukebox in a diner.

Parents often had extra money to give to their teenagers to spend. And on what did teenagers spend their money in the 1950s? That's right—records, radios, rock 'n' roll concerts, and movie tickets.

Teenagers also started spending money at fast-food restaurants that had recently been established. These restaurants became not only places to eat, but also places where teenagers spent time with their friends while listening to their favorite rock 'n' roll hits playing on a radio or jukebox.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., leads civil rights protesters in Mississippi.

## *Culture*

The 1950s was the start of a cultural revolution. For the first time, whites and blacks were listening to the same kind of music and watching the same TV shows. The two races were **integrating** their cultures. In the 1950s, there was a growing push for **civil rights**. Black communities, especially under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., began to protest unfair rights. They fought peacefully against **discrimination** and **segregation** because many blacks could not receive the same opportunities as whites. Teenagers were protesting segregation by listening to black artists sing rock 'n' roll.

Teenagers were breaking down race barriers. Many teenagers did not care who sang rock 'n' roll music. They did not look at the artists' skin color. Black and white artists shared the stage. Rock 'n' roll music helped integrate blacks and whites because it helped break down the walls of segregation.



Rock music continues to appeal to teenagers of all races.



Teenage girls loved to watch Elvis Presley perform.

## Conclusion

Rock 'n' roll music developed through the influences of several musical genres, the contributions of several musicians with various backgrounds, advances in technology, and both economic and cultural changes in society. Rock 'n' roll emerged with a new sound that combined the backbeat drumming style with the uniqueness of the electric guitar. American musicians pioneered this diverse genre that is heard around the world.

## Glossary

**acoustic** (*adj.*)

of or relating to a musical instrument that does not use an electronic device to produce sound (p. 12)

**authority** (*n.*)

a person or group of people that directs what people can or cannot do (p. 6)

**civil rights** (*n.*)

the freedoms guaranteed by a government to its people (p. 19)

**console** (*n.*)

a cabinet that stands on the floor and holds a radio or television set (p. 9)

**contributions** (*n.*)

things or efforts given to a common goal or purpose (p. 4)

**disc jockey** (*n.*)

someone who selects, announces, and plays popular pre-recorded music, usually on the radio (p. 4)

**discrimination** (*n.*)

unfair treatment of a group of people based on a trait of that group (p. 19)

**economy** (*n.*)

the system of buying and selling goods in a society (p. 18)

**genre** (*n.*)

a kind or type of art (p. 4)

**gig** (*n.*)

a slang word used by musicians that means a scheduled performance (p. 17)

**hangouts** (*n.*)

a slang word for places where people, often teenagers, spend time (p. 10)

<b>influence</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the effect or power that something or someone has over an event or common purpose (p. 4)
<b>institutions</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	large, organized groups within a community, such as schools or hospitals, that have the power to shape people's lives (p. 6)
<b>integrating</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	joining two or more groups into one larger group (p. 19)
<b>jukebox</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a machine that takes money to play from a large selection of music (p. 8)
<b>lyrics</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the words to a song (p. 6)
<b>phonograph</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the device used for playing records (p. 7)
<b>rockabilly</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	style of music that combines elements of rock 'n' roll with elements of country and western music (p. 15)
<b>segregation</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a policy of separating groups of people from one another, often an act of discrimination (p. 19)
<b>trademark</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a personal style unique to a person (p. 16)
<b>transistor</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a small electronic device that controls the flow of electricity in such things as radios; it replaced the vacuum tube (p. 9)

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