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 ***“Shake, Rattle, and Roll! Exploring the sounds of Rock N’ Roll”***

**The Story –**

Elvis Presley said, “Rock and roll music, if you like it, if you feel it, you can't help but move to it. That's what happens to me. I can't help it.” Like swing, one of the key characteristics rock n’ roll music brought was dancing. And it was a lot of dancing! New dances like the bunny hop, hand jive, and the stroll all became common, but yet were controversial due to their level of intimacy. Before WWII, music was primarily written by adults and for adults. However, by the mid to late 40s during the post WWII era, this began to change. African Americans had more working opportunities. As we learned from our study on early rhythm and blues, they moved to various places in the U.S. for job opportunities. Initially, this music was by black musicians for black people. However, as this style gained momentum, it attracted white teenagers. Moreover, by the very early 50s, now years after the end of WWII, millions of homes were being built in suburbia. Family sizes vastly increased due to the baby boomers generation. In fact, a third of the US population was under 15 years old in 1958! Teenagers, a word that was non-existent before the rock n’ roll era, now had freedoms they never had before WWII. Families felt safe. Not a single bomb was dropped on US soil and the United States was able to move away from the residual affects of the depression, recession, and WWII. Along with these freedoms though came trouble. There was an increased amount of marijuana smoking among teenagers. In the deep south, there was drunkenness and legalized prostitution. With these increased troubles came a new profound sound of music people called rock n’ roll. While many think of Elvis Presley as being the originator of rock n’ roll, a man by the name of Fats Domino was a key originator of rock n’ roll. Although Fats originally played music that was rooted in New Orleans rhythm and blues, his song, “The Fat Man” was an instrumental song that started bridging the gap from rhythm and blues to rock n’ roll. He played with simple triplet chords that would make people dance, and his concerts integrated black and white audiences in a time of racial segregation. Moreover, by 1950, pop radio appealed to the older generation of people. Think of Doris Day or Patti Page. These women were just starting to build their solo careers and had much success among mainstream audiences. However, with the invention of the jukebox in 1950, this further spread the popularity of early rock n’ roll music. Disc Jockeys would host dance parties for teenagers in different venues. Fats Domino and others like Little Richard would perform for this population on a regular basis. This whole frenzy caught the attention of advertisers. It was this time they started to promote the teenager with hip and cool objects like coca cola, cars, girls, and the like! This all contributed to the growth and momentum of rock n’ roll!

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**The Rise of Rock N’ Roll**

Many critics consider the first official song of rock n’ roll to be “Rock Around The Clock” from Bill Haley and The Comets in 1954. Although early rhythm and blues gave birth to rock n’ roll, this song represented a mix of rockabilly, early rhythm and blues, country, and even jazz elements. Interestingly, when “Rock Around The Clock” was first released, it didn’t do too well. However, one year later, it was used as a theme in a teenage juvenile delinquent movie called Blackboard Jungle. Teenagers most appealed to this movie since it was written about this demographic. Although this song had a slow start, after its feature on Blackboard Jungle, it helped bring rock n’ roll to the mainstream audiences and solidified rock n’ roll as a style. One of the reasons Blackboard Jungle did so well is because it depicted the young demographic of teenagers being rebels. Since rock n’ roll was a style that involved rebelling, the movie significantly propelled the popularity of rock n’ roll. The song “Rock Around The Clock” was number 1 on the charts for 8 weeks by the year 1956. Along with “Rock Around The Clock”, American DJ Allen Freed was influential in the spread of Rock N’ Roll. He was a key person to start using the phrase “Rock N’ Roll” and spread its popularity via the radio through his show, “The Moon Dog House”.

Since segregation was still rampant, producer Sam Philips looked to change this. Sam quit a lucrative job to start a studio that did recordings for black musicians. Sam Philips eventually encountered Elvis Presley. This led to the further height, commercialization, and appeal of rock n’ roll to the mainstream. Elvis was very influential because of his ability to sound African American. He also did unique moves and dances that would appeal to women. His moves were very controversial. TV icon, Ed Sullivan only filmed his waste up since many considered Elvis to be too raunchy for public television!

Lastly, Little Richard would personify himself as a homosexual in the south so he wasn’t a threat to white women or white audiences. This was one of the ways black musicians would be able to play in white venues, considering that the KKK and white supremacy groups were rampant in the south. The strategy of imposing to be a homosexual helped introduce rock n’ roll to the south. While this seems controversial in the present culture we live in, we must understand that racial segregation still existed and this preceded the civil rights movement in the 60s. Therefore, black musicians did what they can to make a name for themselves and build the popularity of rock n’ roll.

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**The Characteristics of Rock N’ Roll**

Rock N’ Roll was a unique and passionate style of music that contained many key characteristics:

\*As we learned, this was music for the teenage demographic. The music impacted how teenagers thought, spoke, dressed, and what they did for recreational activities.

\*Jukeboxes, movies, and disc jockeys were instrumental in the spread of rock n’ roll. As advertisers saw a large proliferation of the teenage demographic appealing to this style, high school gyms were packed with live performances. Jukeboxes were added to venues playing early rock n’ roll from musicians like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Bo Diddley, Fats Domino, and Big Joe Turner to name a few. With movies like Blackboard Jungle and others, teenagers had a voice on the big screen.

\*Cars, cars, and cars! As the automobile industry emerged in the 50s, car racing and car models also influenced rock n’ roll. Lyrics were written about cool cars and men picking up girls for dates with their cool cars. Chuck Berry was a tremendous lyric writer who appealed to the white teenager with money and the cool car.

\*The rhythm. Prior to rock n’ roll, the main rhythm played was a swing, which was the premise of jazz and a shuffle, which was the premise of early rhythm and blues. However, Little Richard helped influence a new approach to rock n’ roll. Early Rock N’ Roll placed emphasis on beats 2 and 4 using a shuffle or swing rhythm. Little Richard, however, emphasized beats 1 and 3, which were known as the downbeats. He would listen to the sound of a train in his neighborhood and mimicked that sound on the piano and guitar. As a result, the rhythm became flattened and straightened out. Drummer, Earl Palmer who played with Little Richard helped revolutionize the style of rock n’ roll by playing a straight flattened beat (give a demonstration of the shuffle to the flattened beat). He would also crash the cymbal on count 1 after playing a drum fill. Because of this influence of the new straight rhythm, drummers by the late 50s no longer identified themselves as jazz drummers. Rock N’ Roll now had its own identity and they called themselves rock n’ roll drummers.

\*Early elements of racial integration. Rock N’ Roll was a key style in bringing together white and black audiences together. In a time of segregation, this style broke down some of those barriers of segregation where teenagers did not care what skin color a person was. They just wanted to have a good time! Other acts like Rosa Parks who refused to sit in the back of the bus occurred in 1955 where rock n’ roll started gaining tremendous momentum.

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**The Fall of Rock N’ Roll**

By the late 1950s, rock n’ roll peaked. This came with the likes of “Blueberry Hill” from Fats Domino, “Lucille” from Little Richard, “Great Balls of Fire” from Jerry Lee Lewis, “That’ll be the day” from Buddy Holly, as well as many notable songs from Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley. However, this time also brought a collapse to this style. Here are some notable events that happened that led to the demise of rock n’ roll:

\*There was still strong backlash in the deep south from many leaders of organizations. These leaders dissuaded parents of their children from listening to black music. They would often called it “devil music” and use many other derogatory words. This backlash brought great controversy, especially in southern states.

\*Elvis Presley was drafted in the army by the late 50s. He was never really the same musician after he returned from the army where his style became more mellow and less characteristic of rock n’ roll.

\*Jerry Lee Lewis was black listed from the radio when he married his 13 year old cousin.

\*Chuck Berry was involved in a scandal that served a year and a half in prison.

\*Little Richard gave up his career to become a preacher.

\*Buddy Holly was killed in a plane crash in early 1959 at the age of 32 years old.

\*Rock N’ Roll concerts declined due to violence that was breaking out.

\*Allen Freed was involved in a payola scandal. DJ’s were accepting money to play rock n’ roll on the radio, which was illegal. He passed away just a few years after this scandal.

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**The Instrumentation of Rock N’ Roll**

As we have learned, big bands of the 30s were quite sophisticated, averaging 17 members per band. As time went on though with bebop and early rhythm and blues, the band size greatly reduced. We saw a continuation of this with rock n’ roll. The main instruments used in a typical rock n’ roll band included: an electric guitar, which took on a very important role in this genre. While many garage rock bands after the 50s did not have a pianist, the piano played an essential part in rock n’ roll of the 50s. Think of Little Richard who would use unorthodox and innovative ways of playing the piano! The drum set was also a necessity and gradually grew in size. More cymbals and toms were added to provide more options for playing drum fills and crashing on beat 1. In the big band era, the vocalist played a secondary role in the band. However, by the time of rock n’ roll, the vocalist became the focal point of the band. They would typically also be a rhythmic guitar player. The electric bass also took on a large roll in rock n’ roll music. Invented in the early 1950s, this was widely utilized in your rock n’ roll band of the 1950s. Other secondary instruments used in rock n’ roll sometimes included: a trumpet, trombone, saxophonist, or a harmonica player.

**The Influences of Rock N’ Roll**

**Fats Domino (pianist and vocalist) –** born on February 26th of 1928, Fats was the youngest of 8 children. He started playing the piano at age 10. His first influence was his brother-in-law who was a jazz musician. He taught him basic chords. Fats was so talented that he had the ability to listen to a record a couple times and replicate it. By age 14, he was already playing in New Orleans bars. His song, “Fat Man” was considered by many critics to be the first rock n’ roll song. It sold over 60 million records between 1949-1962. Fats was instrumental in breaking down many racial barriers that existed during his time. White and black audiences were integrated during his shows. Although Fats was considered a key originator of rock n’ roll and was even stated this from Elvis, he wanted a private life. He was known to be very shy and as a result, did not have the fame other stars had during that time. Sadly, he lost many of his personal belongings during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, but made a comeback in 2006 with the album Alive and Kicking. Fats passed away at the age of 89 years old in October 2017.

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**Bill Haley (guitarist and vocalist) –** born on July 6th of 1925, Bill Haley was known as the father of rock n’ roll. His dad was a farmer and mom was an organist for her church. Haley expressed a desire to play music at an early age. He considered Hank Williams to be a key influence. According to many, Bill Haley was thought to have the first rock n’ roll band called The Comets. Further, he was the first white musician to record a rhythm and blues hit in 1951. While his first few songs didn’t reach stardom success, the rhythm and blues song, “Rocket 88” became a huge hit. Bill Haley was also the first white artist to take elements of early rhythm and blues, western swing, and hillbilly music to perform rock n’ roll. His song, “Crazy Man Crazy” reached the billboards in 1953 and was considered by many, to be the first rock and roll song since it was the first song to enter the pop records. His notable song, “Rock Around The Clock” sold over 20 million copies and brought Haley in the limelight. However, after the rise of Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, and Chuck Berry, Haley’s domestic popularity waned and found some success in Great Britain and Mexico in the 60s and 70s. From 1955-60, he had 22 top hits played and played in 4 movies. Haley was diagnosed with a brain tumor and passed away in 1981 at the age of 55 after a tour in South Africa.

**Little Richard (pianist and vocalist) –** born on December 5th of 1932, Little Richard was the 3rd of 12 children. He was exposed to gospel music at a very young age as his father was a deacon, and mother was a regular church goer. He often clashed with this father and was kicked out of his home at a young age. Like Bill Haley, Little Richard was considered one of the first to introduced rock n’ roll records where he would integrate his gospel influence and blues style to develop his own unique style. Known for playing aggressively on the piano where he would play with his elbows or stomp with his feet, Little Richard was perceived as wild, unpredictable, and flamboyant. He elevated his hair and wore make up. His first success came in 1949 where he performed in the Doctor Nubillo traveling show. In 1950, Little Richard performed with Buster Brown. It was Buster who gave the name Little Richard because of his very thin frame. During the early 50s, Little Richard’s first few songs were not very successful, but he performed a demo record for Arthur Rupe in 1955. It was this same time he did the song, “Tutti Frutti” that skyrocketed his career. This song made him an overnight success. This song followed up with “Lucille”, which also did tremendous. Like Fats Domino, Little Richard integrated white and black audiences together. During the shows, whites and blacks were seated separately, but by the end of the show, they were integrated together and dancing. In 1958, Little Richard had an epiphany and felt a vocational calling to evangelize and preach the gospel. However, in 1962, he returned back to the stage performing opening acts for the up and coming Beatles and The

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Rolling Stones. After succumbing to drugs, he once again turned back to ministry in 1977 performing gospel songs. However, in 1984, he went back to performing on the stage in the public scene. Around this time, he developed a strong commercial presence starring in films and talk shows. He retired in 2013 and passed away on May 9th, 2020. Little Richard went on to influence many prominent and revolutionary artists. Paul McCartney, James Brown, and Prince all labeled Little Richard as an influence in their careers.

**Chuck Berry (vocalist, songwriter, and guitarist) –** Eric Clapton once said that if you played any rock n’ roll song, you would end up playing like Chuck Berry. Born on October 18th, 1926, Chuck Berry was considered to be one of the most influential rock n’ roll musicians. Like Haley, Chuck Berry was known to be the “Father of Rock N’ Roll”. He was considered to be one of the best lyrical rock n’ roll musicians. Berry was raised by educated parents. His mother was a school principal and father was a church deacon. He grew up in a black haven environment and didn’t encounter a white person until the age of 3 years old when a firefighter was putting out a fire in his neighborhood. By age 6, he started singing in the church. After a talent show, he wanted to learn the guitar. At this time, he started taking lessons from a jazz musician. Although music played an integral role in his life at an early age, trouble entered his life early on. Berry was sent to prison for 3 years for robbing stores as a teenager. After he got out of jail at age 21, he got married and worked for his father, but music was always in his heart. He would play guitar on a regular basis and started a band that involved country and jazz styles. He then went to Chicago to do recordings. His song, “Maybellene” was his first big hit song. It reached number 1 on the rhythm and blues charts. By the mid 50s, Chuck Berry was at his peak with longs like, “Johnny B. Goode” and “Roll Over Beethoven”. He was arrested again in the late 50s and sent to prison for 4 years. After serving in prison, he returned back to music, but was never the same. His songs lacked the pizazz and popularity they had in the 50s. Berry was the very first inductee in the Rock N’ Roll Hall of Fame in 1986. He influenced bands like The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and The Beach Boys. Chuck Berry passed away in 2017 at the age of 90.

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**Elvis Presley (vocalist, guitarist, and pianist) –** born in Tupelo, Mississippi on January 8th, 1935, Elvis was as “The King of Rock N’ Roll”. Many considered him to be the sexiest and most dangerous man alive! Denounced by preachers and parents dissuading their children to abstain from his music, Elvis took the teenage demographic by storm. Regardless of the controversies, Elvis was and is still considered one of the greatest influences in music culture who bridged black and white audiences together due to his black sounding voice. Early on, Elvis grew up in a very poor family. At age 10, he gave his first performance at The Mississippi Alabama Fair in 19 45. On his 11th birthday, Elvis requested for a bike or rifle gun, but his mom bought him a guitar in fear of getting himself into danger. At 13 years old, Elvis and his family moved to Memphis. At this time, he would hear the sounds of rhythm and blues, country, and gospel music on Beale Street in Memphis that influenced him. In 1953, Elvis walked into Sunset Records to perform a demo worth only $4. Producer Sam Philips loved what he heard. His song, “That’s Alright” was the first recording Sam Philips did with Elvis. This song was an overnight success and was continually played on the radio. A little over one year later, Elvis was on a Louisiana radio show that was heard on 13 different states. This caught the attention of promotor Colonel Tom Parker. He started to book gigs for Elvis where he would quickly sell out. Parker knew he had someone special and signed him to a deal with RCA Records. His first big hit song, “Heart Break Hotel” in 1956 became a best seller. That year was also capitalized by “Hound Dog” and then “Jailhouse Rock” in 1957, which all further enhanced and influenced the style of Rock N’ Roll. By 21 years old, he became the biggest star. Although he was considered to be controversial due to his attire and dance moves, his popularity overcame this. Initially, Ed Sullivan vowed to never have Elves on his show. But money speaks! After seeing his tremendous popularity on other shows, he hosted him. More than 60 million viewers were in tune to watch Elvis on The Ed Sullivan Show! After returning from the army in the 1960s, he made a comeback, but to many, he was never the same. He appeared in close to 30 movies between 1960-68 and his single child was born in 1968. Shortly after, Elvis’s personal life became discheveled. He developed an eating disorder, divorced his wife, and would go on large junk food binges that affected his weight and health. Although performing many live successful shows in Las Vegas, Elvis’s life continued to deteriorate where he developed an addiction to prescription drugs. Elvis Presley passed away in 1977 from a heart attack at the age of 42 years old. Many critics say that there would be no Beatles, Rolling Stones, Bruce Springsteen, or Led Zeppelin if it was not for Elvis Presley.