****

**The foundation! Exploring the sounds of early Rhythm and Blues!**

**The Beginnings –**

As we learned, big band swing music was considered popular mainstream music. By the early 40s, we saw the emergence of a new form of jazz that was experimental and improvisational called bebop. After WWII, big band began to phase out. Bebop attracted a particular demographic of people who appreciated the artistic and creative aspect of playing music, which remained a listening style. However, the dance element lacked since big band regressed. During this time after WWII, the economy started to strengthen and restore itself from years of turbulence and recession. More job opportunities were created. As a result, African Americans began to move from the south to the north and west. Part of this was to get away from the racial segregation and poverty that occurred in the south. Additionally, many factory job opportunities opened in the north. African Americans now had money in their pockets and desired to listen to a style of music they were familiar with. While some of the previous styles we explored emerged from a particular city, R+B came from multiple urban areas, including Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York. This was due to people moving from the south. A young man emerged during this time called Louis Jordan. Louis was a tremendous saxophone player with a jazz background. However, Jordan considered himself more of an entertainer. He would shout in his songs, which went back to field hollers in early blues of the 19th century. His lyrics were relatable and he appealed to white audiences. He had 57 hits in a 9 year span between 1942-1951 making him the largest black selling artist. Around this time, people started calling this new style influenced by Louis Jordan as “Race Music”. However, in an already time of racial segregation, this had racial/controversial overtones. Jim Wexler, producer of Atlantic Records, changed the name appropriately to Rhythm and Blues. This term was coined in the year 1949. Not only was the name more appropriate from a racial standpoint, but it also exemplified what Rhythm and Blues entailed.

**The Characteristics of Rhythm and Blues –**

The term, “Rhythm” meant a hard driving shuffle feel generally played by the drummer. The term, “Blues” meant a 3 chord progression at the center of many R+B songs. Rhythm and Blues was a style that derived from the African American population. It was influenced from 3 key styles of music:

1. Big band jazz – the focal point of the swing era was to make people dance to the music. Rhythm and Blues adapted this element in the late 40s by making its audience dance.

****

**The foundation! Exploring the sounds of early Rhythm and Blues!**

People would gather on Friday evenings to dance in different urban clubs after long hours of a work week.

1. Country blues – shouting was a common characteristic in country blues. Before the invention of microphones, vocalists would shout. This went back to field hollers of the slavery times in the 1860s. R+B adapted this aggressive style of vocalization by adding shouting to the lyrics.
2. Gospel music – clapping played an integral role in gospel music. The element of clapping was carried on to many early rhythm and blues tracks.

Rhythm and Blues is considered an intermediary style that bridged the gap between jazz and rock n’ roll. It also gave birth to a new style to play for musicians. If you were a musician living before WWII, you were most likely a jazz musician. However, by the late 40s with the emergence of R+B and its rising popularity, this became a new style to play.

**The Inventions of Rhythm and Blues –**

Some of the important inventions R+B contributed included the “backbeat”. The backbeat was invented in the year 1948. During this time, “Jumpin’ Blues” existed influenced by Louis Jordan. However, by the late 40s, drummers began to play a consistent beat on counts 2 and 4 so people can dance to the music more easily. You can hear this in the song, “Good Rockin’ Tonight” from Winonie Harris. This was one of the first songs that introduced the backbeat! Although the backbeat was sometimes used at the end of a swing song or for a particular section, it was never the focal point of jazz. The sound of jazz was more open and lighter, whereas R+B was more aggressive and fixed. The backbeat brought people to their feet, and gave birth to Rock N’ Roll. In fact, every contemporary style today involves a backbeat that derived from early R+B!

The shuffle was another key invention. Drummers would play the shuffle on the hi-hat or ride cymbal. As we learned with jazz, the key phrase is the swing rhythm. The shuffle like the swing beat, is based off a triplet feel. The counts are always played on the first and last beats of the triplet. While there are many different versions of a shuffle, it remains the heart and soul beat to rhythm and blues. This particular rhythm allowed for other musicians in the band to play complimentary to the style of R+B.

****

**The foundation! Exploring the sounds of early Rhythm and Blues!**

**The Controversies to Rhythm and Blues –**

R+B attracted an adult audience. The music was originated from black musicians for black audiences. However, this music began to make its way through white audiences. Due to a time of racial segregation, this music created controversy among white listeners. Further, many of the lyrics had sexual and vulgar content, which further brought division. Black musicians would write lyrical content on the hardships they faced, but also wrote about “happy times” like drinking and dancing. These views often brough dissension among conservative groups.

Moreover, these difficulties made it more difficult for the distribution of this music. Many prominent record labeling companies like Decca and Columbia overlooked R+B due to its vulgarity compared to other mainstream popular artists during this time such as Perry Como or Doris Day. Black musicians like The Mills Brothers, Duke Ellington, and The Ink Spots did have a voice in music, but R+B was considered controversial primarily due to the lyrical content. As a result, many small time operations began to emerge of entrepreneurs. Although some of these entrepreneurs had minimal experience in the recording business, they loved music. Therefore, with their help, R+B music began to circulate in these small labeling companies.

While the radio was common and in almost every U.S. household by the late 40s, R+B music was seldom played on the radio. This created even more challenge for this music to be distributed. Instead, black musicians relied on an underground network to distribute records in urbanized cities. These records were sold in grocery stores, barber shops, and many small businesses in black communities that helped increase the awareness of R+B style.

**The Impact of Rhythm and Blues –**

As we learned, R+B served as a bridge between Jazz and Rock n’ Roll. This style gave birth to rock n’ roll. R+B was a foundational style of all contemporary styles we have today. Because of its structure, the influence of the backbeat, smaller band size, and vocal emphasis, this style influenced subsequent styles such as, Rock N’ Roll, Soul, Funk, Disco, and Hip Hop. We would never have these styles we’re so familiar with today if it wasn’t for the foundation of early Rhythm and Blues!

Finally, as R+B began to made its way around the United States, the style adapted to the cultural nuances of each city. This is why we have hybrid blues styles such as: Chicago Blues, Memphis Blues, Texas Blues, and Delta Blues to name a few!

****

**The foundation! Exploring the sounds of early Rhythm and Blues!**

**The Band Set Up of R+B –**

R+B was influenced by big band music regarding the dancing aspect, but the band size was much smaller than a typical big band set up.

A band set up of early R+B was a similar size to bebop jazz, but many technological advances were made that evolved a big sound, which was paramount to R+B. Enhanced recording techniques were used and larger PA systems allowed for drums to play heavier and more aggressively.

A strike occurred in 1942 that kept musicians out of the studios for almost two years. As we learned, this also negatively impacted bebop music since the first song inventions were never recorded. This strike did not apply to vocalists though. As a result, the vocalist emerged as a key focal point to early rhythm and blues.

Along with the vocalist, the electric guitar became a standard and vital instrument to R+B. The guitar was only in existence for about 10 years during this time, but took on a much stronger presence in R+B than in jazz. Guitarists would use a distortion sound, which became common in Rock N’ Roll music.

Although the saxophone was invented back in the 1840s, this became a commonly played instrument in a R+B band. Saxophonists would use techniques such as squeaking to develop unique sounds.

The electric bass was invented in the year 1950 and added to R+B. As we learned, originally, big band jazz had a tuba player. This tuba player was replaced by the upright bassist, and then the upright bass played a more integral role in contemporary music.

Like jazz, the piano continued to play an important role in a band set up of R+B. Pianists such as Charles Brown and Fats Domino were instrumental in developing piano melodies that further developed R+B.

Finally, the drum set continued to evolve. As we learned, in New Orleans jazz, the snare drum was the main time keeper. In big band jazz, the hi-hat was the main time keeper. In bebop jazz, the ride cymbal became the main time keeper. In early R+B, both the hi-hat and ride cymbals became the primary time keepers. Again, we see this common in contemporary music where drummers will play the pulse on the hi-hat or ride cymbal. Another invention

****

**The foundation! Exploring the sounds of early Rhythm and Blues!**

of the drum set was the use of cymbal crashes. Drummers would crash the cymbal within a beat or after a drum fill. This complimented the heavy sound R+B demanded!

**The Influences of Early Rhythm and Blues –**

**Louis Jordan –** Born in 1908, Jordan was a saxophonists, songwriter, and band leader. Although he was skilled in the style of jazz music, he considered himself more of an entertainer. He wanted people to dance and feel entertained. Known as “The Father of R+B”, Louis used a shouting system that went back to field hollers. His lyrics were relatable to everyone and his deliverance had charisma. His style also began to bridge white audiences. Between the years 1942-51, he charted 57 hits making him the biggest selling African American artist of the 40s. Some of his well known songs that typified the style of R+B included: “Ain’t Nobody Here But Us Chicken’s”, “Caldonia”, and “Beware Brother, Beware”. Louis Jordan heavily influenced prominent musicians such as Ray Charles, James Brown, Little Richard, and B.B. King.

**Big Joe Turner –** Was an American Blues Shouter. Born in 1911, Turner sang on street corners to make money. He dropped out of school at the age of 14 years old to pursue music full time, starting as a singing bartender in Kansas City. His song, “Roll ‘Em Pete” in 1938 skyrocketed his career. Although his career tapered off for a period, it was revitalized again with the song, “Shake, Rattle, and Roll”, which topped the R+B charts in 1954. Many of Joe’s songs were considered risqué and not featured on the radio. However, the remained top charted hits and would play on jukeboxes and records.

**Johnny Ottis –** Born in 1921, Johnny Ottis was a multi-instrumentalist and bandleader that developed the sound of R+B. Often coined as the “Godfather of R+B, Johnny’s career spanned for over 50 years playing this style. He took on many roles, including being a player, bandleader, label owner, DJ, and promoter. In 1949, Otis signed with Savoy Records. He had great success where songs of his were in the top 10 best selling hits. Some of these songs further defined the style of R+B, including: “Double Crossing Blues”, and “Cupid’s Boogie”. Not only did Ottis have success as a performer, but also as a scout. He discovered significant names in R+B, including: Jackie Wilson, Little Willie John, Hank Ballard, and The Robins.

**Lionel Hampton –** Born in 1908, Lionel Hampton was a multi-instrumentalist and bandleader. Although Hampton’s name was associated with big band in the early 40s, he was one of the first musicians to experiment playing aggressive rhythmic ideas such as stompin’ boogie woogie shuffles and gospel-style handclaps. His songs “Flyin’ Home” and

****

**The foundation! Exploring the sounds of early Rhythm and Blues!**

“Hamp’s Boogie Woogie” became big hits and exemplified this style Hampton pursued. Thus, Hampton became instrumental in developing Jump Blues, which was a predecessor to Rhythm and Blues.