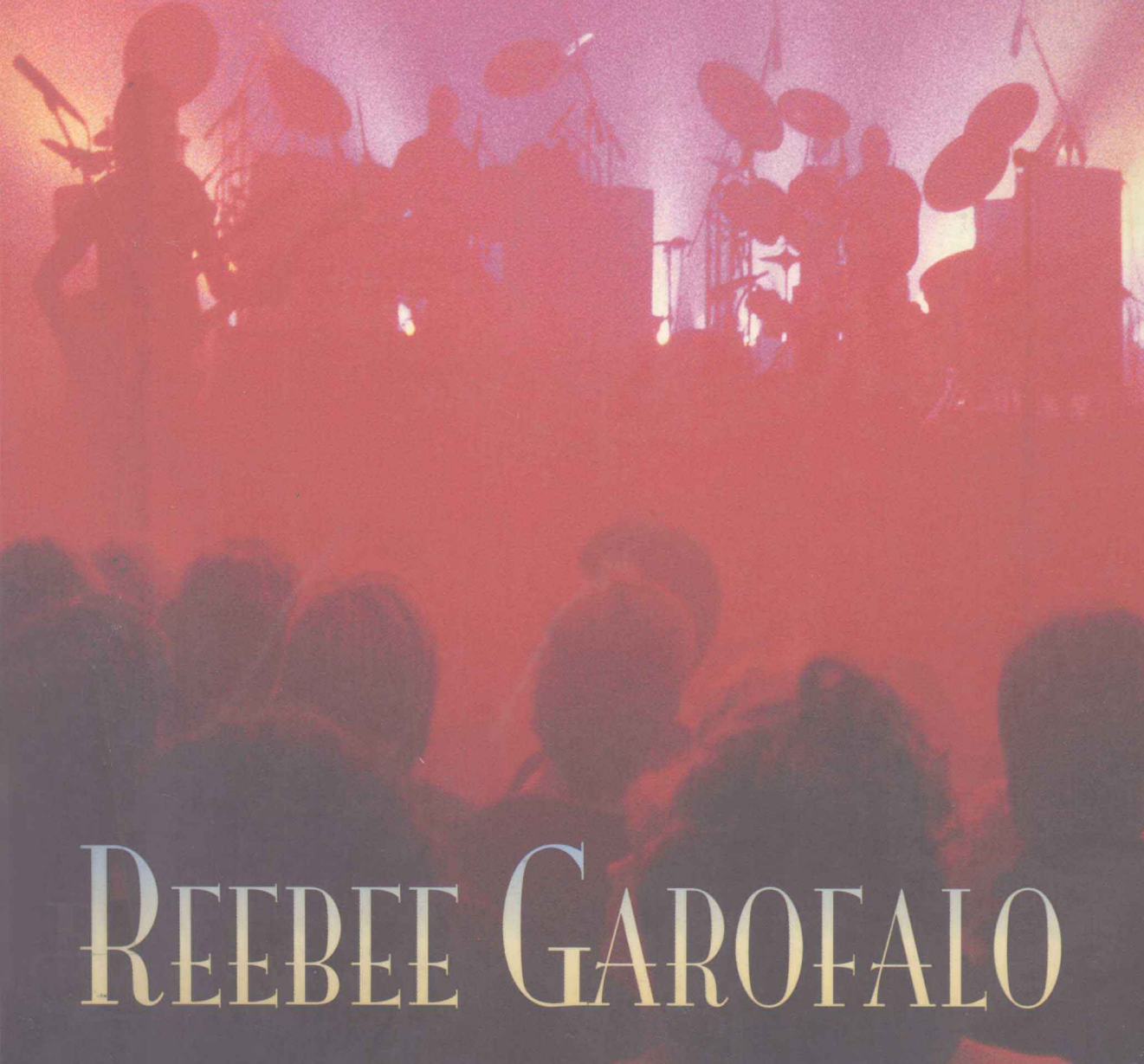


ROCKIN' OUT



POPULAR MUSIC IN THE USA



REEBEE GAROFALO



Rockin' Out

Popular Music in the USA

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University of Massachusetts Boston

Allyn and Bacon

Boston London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore

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A Viacom Company
160 Gould Street
Needham Heights, MA 02194

Internet: www.abacon.com
America Online: keyword: college online

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Garofalo, Reebee.

Rockin' out : popular music in the USA / Reebee Garofalo

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-205-13703-2

1. Popular music—United States—History and criticism.

I. Title.

ML3477.G37 1996

96-33424

781.64'0973—dc20

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8

01 00

Photo Credits:

AP/World Wide Photos: pages 219, 318, 377, 426, 444, and 458

The Bettmann Archive: pages 21 Corbis-Bettmann, 23, 25, 28, 38, 48, 132 UPI/Bettman, 195 UPI/Bettmann, 208 UPI/Bettmann, 227 UPI/Bettmann, 233 UPI/Corbis-Bettmann, 262 Penguin/Corbis-Bettmann, 319, 359 UPI/Corbis-Bettmann, 383 Reuters/Bettmann, and 417 Corbis-Bettmann

BMI Archives: pages 52, 54, 58, 75, 77, 81, 82, 90, 104, 106, 110, 113, 117, 119, 127, 137, 142, 156, 162, 166, 168, 178, 186, 192 (inset), 199, 202, 211, 215, 216, 225, 234, 254, 260, 266, 268 both photos, 272, 281, 337, 342, 344, 362, 367, 369, 388, 422, 449 © Chris Cuffaro, 452, and 456

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Preface

Since its inception, popular music has been a source of pleasure for millions of people all over the world. This, of course, is reason enough for listening to it. But popular music is also a social and political indicator that mirrors and influences the society we all live in. This is the reason for studying it.

Popular music—playing it, listening to it, learning from it, teaching it—has been one of the organizing principles of my life ever since I can remember. It energizes me, provides the soundtrack for significant moments in my life, and helps me to navigate the world around me. In society at large, discussions of popular music’s significance can be found everywhere—from family dinners and Saturday night parties to the board room and congressional chambers.

There has also been an increasing interest in popular music courses on college and university campuses. As a teacher of such courses for many years, I have found that the current field of popular music studies is often steeped in debates about culture theory that are needlessly esoteric, if not impenetrable. *Rockin’ Out*, in contrast, is intended to introduce a general readership to the body of music that underpins these discussions; it is informed by theory without being engulfed by it. While the book is necessarily encyclopedic, it balances information with interpretation.

Popular music cannot be fully understood simply as a set of musical elements in the traditional sense and then measured against some abstract aesthetic norm of quality. Because aesthetic judgments are themselves culturally determined, in studying popular music, it is important to recognize that the musical text is as much a product of its social and political context as any individual’s creativity or talent. While specifics of the music must always frame the discussion, a thorough analysis of popular music requires an understanding of history, economics, technology, politics, and cultural practices. Accordingly, *Rockin’ Out* offers a grounded, coherent, social history of U.S. popular music since the invention of the phonograph in 1877. The book locates popular music in a social context and provides an interdisciplinary analysis of its impact.

The question of boundaries—what to include within the parameters of popular music and what to exclude, what to emphasize and what to mention in passing—pre-

sents an obvious set of issues for a book like this one. Most histories draw boundaries around popular music and exclude classical music, folk music (as opposed to certain folk revivals), and most jazz (particularly where it aspires to be an art music). I have tended to continue this practice. I have also limited myself to music that has exerted an influence in the United States. Because the enslavement and subsequent oppression of African Americans and the resulting cultural interactions have had such a profound effect on the development of our popular music, my inclination is to view popular music first through the lens of race. Needless to say, this is not the only dimension that I consider important. Other crucial demographic variables include class, age, gender, and ethnicity. Technological advances and the political economy of the music industry have also been important in shaping the development of popular music. Finally, popular music invariably develops in relation to the prevailing political climate in a given era. These, therefore, are the themes that run through this book.

Because the notion of “popularity” has an obvious quantitative dimension, I attach a certain amount of importance to sales data. A record that no one hears has no impact. Accordingly, *Rockin’ Out* is peppered with popularity chart listings and references to “gold” and “platinum” records. These benchmarks of commercial success are currently defined in *Billboard*, the leading music trade magazine, as the sale of 500,000 album units and 1 million album units respectively. Being mindful of commercial success guards against the tendency to inflate one’s personal preferences to the status of aesthetic principles. At the same time, it is important to note that commercially successful artists and records may or may not be the most influential or artistically important. Historical accounts, musical analyses, critical reviews, and audience reactions are important qualitative indicators that must also be factored into any discussion of popular music.

Because histories such as this one focus on a period in popular music history that has been dominated by various rock styles, they often use “rock” as a generic term for all popular music. The term is a convenient (and, in many ways, appealing) shorthand but it is not without its problems. In the 1960s, the term rock ‘n’ roll, which had always crossed the racial divide, was shortened to “rock,” a refinement suggesting a more mature form of the music. By this time, however, rock clearly signified the music of white artists, primarily those associated with the British Invasion and the counterculture in the United States. It was distinguished from “soul,” the term used for the music of African Americans. Given the significant contribution of African American artists to popular music during this period, I am critical of the subsequent use of “rock” as the generic term for contemporary popular music. At the same time, I am aware of the difficulty of avoiding this usage since it appears so frequently in the literature. I would also argue that the verb form, rocking, continues to cross the racial divide as something popular music does rather than what it is.

Given that the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll is taken as a crucial development in the history of popular music, the opening chapters are devoted to a discussion of the changes

that pointed the way to rock 'n' roll. The introductory chapter, "Introduction: Definitions, Themes, and Issues," provides an overview of the defining characteristics of popular music, a discussion of the key issues involved in the transition from Tin Pan Alley pop (the music that dominated the mainstream in the first half of the twentieth century) to the emergence of rock 'n' roll, and a sense of the continuing developments that bring the history to the present. As such, it orients the reader to the broad cultural changes and notable controversies that have shaped U.S. popular music in the twentieth century.

Chapter 1, "Mass Technology and Popular Taste: The Tin Pan Alley Era," begins with the invention of the phonograph because records were one critical element in the advent of rock 'n' roll. It then details the rise of Tin Pan Alley and explores the relationship of Tin Pan Alley to African American music (ragtime, blues, and jazz) and to the mass media (records, radio, and film).

Chapter 2, "Blues and Country Music: Mass Media and the Construction of Race" analyzes the history of grassroots music that developed parallel to Tin Pan Alley, but often beneath its notice. While histories of blues and country music are often dealt with separately, they are paired here to emphasize that both served a similar social function and that there was a considerable amount of cross cultural interplay that occurred outside the separate and unequal marketing structures of the music industry. The device of pairing seemingly disparate musical genres is replicated in Chapter 8 with punk and disco, and again, in Chapter 10 with rap and metal.

The long and winding musical road that led to the emergence of rhythm and blues, the genre that made the most substantive contribution to rock 'n' roll, is the subject of Chapter 3, "'Good Rockin' Tonight': The Rise of Rhythm and Blues." It is a tale of population migrations, structural realignments within the music industry, wartime materials shortages, and technological advances that unexpectedly brought a working-class, African American music to the fore.

Chapters 4 and 5 are companion chapters detailing, respectively, the rise of and reaction to rock 'n' roll. Chapter 4, "Crossing Cultures: The Eruption of Rock 'n' Roll," discusses the ascending styles of fifties rock 'n' roll, including New Orleans rhythm and blues and its Los Angeles independent label connections, electrified Chicago blues, the r&b and country output of Cincinnati, the rhythm and gospel fusion that emerged from the black church, the hybrid sounds of New York doo wop, and country-tinged Memphis rockabilly. Chapter 5, "The Empire Strikes Back: The Reaction to Rock 'n' Roll," chronicles the conservative backlash to rock 'n' roll that prompted a range of strategies designed to limit the music. These included "cover" records, pop diversions from folk to calypso, television promotion, and government-sponsored payola hearings. Surf music emerged from the rubble as one vibrant new sound, whose success was nevertheless linked to the ascendancy of white middle-class rockers.

If the 1960s and early 1970s were a time of personal experimentation, cultural expansion, and political advancement for artists and fans, they were paralleled by a period

of unprecedented mergers in the music industry. Ultimately, centralization in the industry and divisive political forces in the broader society led to the fragmentation of the music. Chapters 6 and 7 are companion chapters that deal with the ups and downs of music during this period. Chapter 6, “Popular Music and Political Culture: The Sixties,” explores the relationship between rock (and its folk rock and psychedelic variants) and rhythm and blues (and its gospel-tinged cousin soul) and the social and political movements that dominated the decade—especially the Civil Rights movement and the counterculture. Chapter 7, “Music Versus Markets: The Fragmentation of Pop,” details the corporate consolidation that accompanied a huge expansion of the industry infrastructure and the fragmentation of the music into softer rock and soul styles on the one hand and art rock, heavy metal, and glam on the other.

Beginning with a view of the soft, safe center of corporate pop rock that propelled tried-and-true musical formulas to mass sales, Chapter 8, “Punk and Disco: The Poles of Pop,” analyzes the commercial potential and political tendencies of two genres of popular music that were widely viewed as polar opposites. Punk was the beneficiary of the lion’s share of critical praise because of its presumed political possibilities. Disco was roundly ignored—or worse, actively despised—even though it came closer to realizing the political goal of uniting disparate groups across lines of class, race, and sexual preference.

Chapter 9, “Music Videos, Superstars, and Mega-Events: The Eighties,” explores new developments in the music industry, including a major recession, significant technological advances, and the politicization of popular music with the advent of charity rock. In this period, superstars pointed the way out of the recession for the industry, as advances in satellite transmission facilitated their promotion to a global audience. Interestingly, the same technology that encouraged expansion and concentration in the music industry also created the “mega-events” that disseminated messages of political opposition and solidarity world-wide.

In Chapter 10, “Rap and Metal: Youth Culture and Censorship,” rap and metal are paired as the cutting edge expressions of youth culture in the 1980s. The chapter chronicles the rise of each style and the ferocious public reaction that each precipitated. In the context of the conservative Reagan/Bush years, organizations following the lead of the Washington-based Parents Music Resource Center sought to impose the most serious regulations on popular music since the payola hearings of 1959–60. Issues of drug use, suicide, devil worship, sexuality, and violence are explored in detail.

Rockin’ Out concludes with a discussion of so-called alternative music and its relationship to the mainstream music industry. Chapter 11 is titled “Alternative to What?” to call attention to the meteoric rise of alternative music from outsider status to mainstream marketing category. It occurred amidst such a flurry of critical press that nobody noticed that the early part of the 1990s was dominated by country music, if anything. In the context of conglomerate mergers of astronomical proportions including unprecedented artists’ contracts, the anti-commercial tendencies of alternative music seemed

that much more contradictory. Nowhere were these contradictory impulses more apparent than in the Lollapalooza festivals. Lollapalooza—at the same time commercially successful and politically relevant—is a fitting capstone for the 40-plus year history of contemporary popular music.

A book that is the scope of *Rockin' Out* does not fall from the sky. In addition to original research, it draws on my previously published work and the work of countless others. While encyclopedias, journal articles, and book-length studies have, of course, provided me with a wealth of secondary source material, discussions over the years with Bill Adler, William Barlow, Iain Chambers, Jannette Dates, Murray Forman, Simon Frith, Donna Gaines, Andrew Goodwin, Herman Gray, Larry Grossberg, Charles Hamm, Dave Harker, Simon Jones, Steve Jones, Charlie Keil, George Lipsitz, Dick Lourie, Portia Maultsby, Susan McClary, Keith Negus, Richard Peterson, Tricia Rose, Danny Schechter, Larry Shore, Philip Tagg, Robert Walser, Peter Wicke, and many others too numerous to mention have been invaluable in shaping my own positions. In addition, I would like to thank the reviewers for their valuable suggestions: Will Straw, McGill University; David Stuart, Iowa State University; Robert D. West, Kent State University; and David Sanjeck, BMI Archives. Dave Sanjeck demonstrated repeatedly that he is one of the most knowledgeable and forthcoming researchers in the field, and also deserves special mention in his capacity as BMI archivist for gracing these pages with a treasure trove of photographs. Finally, the late Rick Dutka occupies a special place in my heart and mind as someone whose knowledge of and love for popular music were as boundless as his political energy and activist spirit.

As to my previous work, echoes of *Rock 'n' Roll Is Here to Pay*, the book with which I am most identified, can certainly be detected in *Rockin' Out*. In this instance, I owe a major debt of gratitude to first author Steve Chapple, whose pioneering contributions to popular music studies helped define the field and pushed me to formulate my views. My chapter on the history of black popular music that appeared in *Split Image*, edited by Jannette Dates and William Barlow, informs the discussions of r&b, soul, and rap that appear in this book. An earlier version of the discussion of popular music and the Civil Rights movement was published in *Radical America*. More detailed versions of my research on mega-events have appeared in *Re-Imaging America*, edited by Mark O'Brien and Craig Little; *Technoculture*, edited by Constance Penley and Andrew Ross; and in my *Rockin' the Boat*. My research on censorship has been published in greater detail in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies* and was funded by a grant from the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities and the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and neither group bears any responsibility for my opinions on the subject.

Bringing *Rockin' Out* to press has been a project of mammoth proportions. I am, first, indebted to Susannah Brabant for bringing my proposal to the attention of Bill Barke at Allyn and Bacon, and I am thankful to Bill for being the music lover that he is. By the time I finished the manuscript, my first editor, Steve Hull, had already passed the

baton to Joe Opiela who gave me the much needed and appreciated extensions to see the project through to completion. My production team was a joy to work with from the start. Susan McNally coordinated competing needs and schedules with a firm but gentle touch that added a thoroughly enjoyable warmth and sense of humor to her competence and professionalism. Copyeditor Pat Carda's organization of the text was invaluable to me, and the book is markedly better for it. Designer Denise Hoffman came up with page layouts and graphic devices that, to me, complement the tone and voice of the book perfectly. There is also a staff team back at the home office whom I have met only briefly but whom I feel have been pulling for the book nonetheless; they certainly include Sandi Kirshner, Deborah Brown, and Karon Bowers, and probably others whom I haven't met. Clerical assistance from Kate Tolini facilitated communication.

My biggest debt of gratitude goes to my family, who put up with me during the four years it took to complete this project. Deborah Pacini Hernandez and I commuted between Boston and Gainesville, Florida, throughout the preparation of the manuscript. Her children, Radha and Tai, have yet to discover how mellow I can really be without a deadline hanging over my head. Radha has the most eclectic appreciation of music of anyone I know; it is a joy and a learning experience to watch her tastes—indeed, her whole life—unfold. The same goes for Tai whose tastes run more to the cutting edge. Tai also gets the credit for coming up with the name for the book. Debby is not just my partner, but a colleague whose knowledge of popular music has added measurably to my own. Throughout the project she offered perspective, insight, and criticism that were incredibly valuable and emotional support I could not have done without. In addition, she read more variations of individual paragraphs of the manuscript than any human being should ever have had to endure. And in the middle of the project, she even consented to marry me. This preface was written one year later at the tail end of our long-awaited, but very satisfying, honeymoon.

Finally, this book is dedicated with love and respect to my mother and father who have seen me through every trial and triumph of my life. I owe them more than words can say.

Reebee Garofalo
July 1996

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Introduction: Definitions, Themes, and Issues

Broadly speaking, there have been two great eras of mainstream popular music in the United States in this century: the era dominated by the writers and publishers of Tin Pan Alley, which began at the turn of the century and continued through the end of World War II, and the era that began with the emergence of rock 'n'

roll in the early 1950s and continues to the present day. The term rock 'n' roll is thus used to describe both the particular music that became popular among youth in the 1950s and the paradigm that dominated popular music thereafter. Rockin' Out begins with the rise of Tin Pan Alley because all of the technological advances (sound recording, radio broadcasting, and to a lesser extent, film and television) and all the musical styles (blues, jazz, country, rhythm and blues, and Tin Pan Alley pop itself) that contributed to development of rock 'n' roll came to fruition during its reign.

While this book covers more than one hundred years of recorded music, its primary focus is on the second half of the twentieth century. The pivotal moment in this history was the emergence of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s, as the transition from Tin Pan Alley to rock 'n' roll revealed important social and cultural shifts in U.S. society. If the music of Tin Pan Alley was lighthearted and urbane, the rock 'n' roll of the 1950s was heavy-handed and urban. While Tin Pan Alley appealed to middle-class sensibilities, rock 'n' roll was decidedly working-class in its orientation. Whereas Tin Pan Alley made no particular age distinctions among its listeners, rock 'n' roll was targeted at youth. Tin Pan Alley was identified with sheet music in the same way that rock 'n' roll was associated with

The rock 'n' roll that emerged in the fifties combined all the elements that would define the broad parameters of popular music in the United States for at least the next forty years.

records, and it was this difference that signified the beginning of an inextricable connection between popular music and advanced recording technology. Finally, the music of Tin Pan Alley evolved according to a Euro-American paradigm of music making, even when it incorporated other cultural influences. In contrast, rock 'n' roll turned dramatically toward African American conventions. In short, the rock 'n' roll that emerged in the fifties combined all the elements that would define the broad parameters of popular music in the United States for at least the next forty years.

Into the Twentieth Century: Popular Music and Mass Culture

In its association with sheet music, Tin Pan Alley can be seen as a descendant of a popular culture that dates back to the invention of the printing press in fifteenth-century Europe.¹ When the music of Tin Pan Alley emerged, popular music was distinguished from both folk music and folk culture on the one hand and classical or art music and high culture on the other. These distinctions are a part of our inheritance that came with European colonization.

Prior to the advent of popular culture in Europe, European societies were characterized by a two-tiered system of culture which was composed of folk culture and high culture. While there is ample evidence to suggest that there was considerable interaction between the two; at the time, these different levels of culture were officially considered separate and distinct. Historically, folk culture has been associated with the poor and those lacking formal education—in European feudal societies, the peasantry; after the Industrial Revolution, agricultural workers and the urban proletariat. It was a collective and participatory culture, shared by a particular community of people. The music arising from it was comparatively simple in form and structure, performed by nonprofessionals, and passed along, usually anonymously, in oral tradition. Its production and consumption were noncommercial. At the other end of the European cultural spectrum was high culture, which was associated with the ruling classes—the feudal aristocracy, the capitalist bourgeoisie. Its music was more complicated in form and structure and composed by paid professionals who were commissioned through a system of patronage. Because this music was notated (written down), it required a certain literacy and training for its performance. High culture thus imposed a separation between artists and consumers that was unknown in folk culture. What was a community in folk culture became an audience in high culture. As the official culture of court and church, high culture was considered to be superior to folk culture.

Popular culture insinuated itself between folk culture and high culture as a third cultural category, a hybrid that was distinguishable from both but borrowed freely from

each as needed. Tin Pan Alley provides an excellent example of these contradictory tendencies. In attempting to cater exclusively to popular (albeit narrow mainstream) tastes, Tin Pan Alley writers consciously sought to construct an alternative to the cultural dominance of European art music. In the process, these writers incorporated influences, however superficially, from wide range of sources including a number of African American genres. At the same, however, these writers often took their cues from classical music and high culture. As late as 1941, for example, the melody of “Tonight We Love,” a popular song by Ray Austin and Bobby Worth was lifted virtually note for note from the first movement of Tchaikovsky’s *Piano Concerto No. 1*. Furthermore, in leaning heavily on upper-middle-class themes and images—dining at the Ritz, performing in black tie and tails—Tin Pan Alley writers further (and perhaps unwittingly) allied themselves with the high culture they sought to displace.

The invention of new mass communication technologies—records, radio, film, and eventually, television—inserted yet another distinction into the cultural lexicon, namely the concept of mass culture. The new term indicated cultural dissemination on a scale that increased by orders of magnitude. The question of scale had important implications for qualitative judgments about mass culture. Prior to the advent of mass culture, it was possible to consider popular culture as historically continuous with folk culture, either slowly replacing folk cultures as the next stage of development following the Industrial Revolution or as coexisting with rural or industrial folk cultures in the modern era. When viewed in this way, popular culture, like folk culture, was a culture of the people. With the introduction of the mass media, however, the idea of a continuing historical progression came to an abrupt halt. In the eyes of most observers, the emergence of mass culture was accompanied by a subtle but important shift in orientation from a culture *of* the people to a culture *for* the masses. In this deceptively simple change there was a profound transformation of meaning. Mass culture was not seen as the lived culture of an identifiable group of people, which reflected their values and aspirations. It was instead a commodified culture produced by a centralized, corporate culture industry for privatized, passive consumption by an alienated, undifferentiated mass.⁴ Thus, although the terms *mass culture* and *popular culture* are often used interchangeably today, most observers tended to distinguish between the two in language that was pejorative and/or politically charged until well into the 1960s. In 1959, for example, Oscar Handlin, among others, argued forcefully against “the misconception that the ‘mass culture’ of the present is but an extension of the popular culture of the past.”² Indeed, as late as 1965, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel maintained that “the typical ‘art’ of the mass media today is not a continuity from, but a *corruption of*, popular art.”³

In the eyes of most observers, the emergence of mass culture was accompanied by a subtle but important shift in orientation from a culture of the people to a culture for the masses.

Rock ‘n’ roll, of course, could be numbered among the victims of this largely false distinction. As an unabashedly commercial product clearly intended for mass consump-

tion, most critics dismissed the music as inferior and unworthy of serious consideration. To avoid the mass culture stigma, critics and historians in the 1960s who became invested in the cultural importance of rock as the mature form of rock 'n' roll, tended to characterize the music as something other than what it was. Historian Carl Belz, for example, argued that "rock is a part of the long tradition of folk art in the United States and throughout the world."⁵ As the music took a turn toward greater sophistication, this characterization underwent further change. Discussions of Bob Dylan's lyrics as poetry and the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* as art reflected an attempt by some to "elevate" rock from folk music to art, thereby allying it with high culture. At the time, these efforts to categorize rock represented genuine attempts to understand the place of popular music in the hierarchy of cultural practices. Ultimately, however, there was no getting around the fact that rock was both a popular music and a mass cultural form. In 1981, music sociologist Simon Frith, among others, dismissed both earlier positions of rock as folk and rock as art. "Rock is a commercially made mass music," he asserted, "and this must be the starting point for its celebration as well as its dismissal."⁶ Since then, musical practices have been discussed more in terms of the death throes of the modern era and its uneasy segue into postmodernism, a period characterized by, among other things, the collapse of all cultural categories.

Rock 'n' Roll: The Birth of a New Era

The straightforward commercialism and mass appeal of rock 'n' roll did not set it apart from other popular music. What made rock 'n' roll different was its urban orientation, focus on youth culture, and appeal to working-class sensibilities, and its relationship to technology and African American musical influences and performance styles. As Charlie Gillett argues in his classic study *The Sound of the City*, rock 'n' roll was the first popular genre to incorporate the relentless pulse and sheer volume of urban life into the music itself. In his words, "Rock and Roll was perhaps the first form of popular culture to celebrate without reservation characteristics of city life that had been among the most criticized."⁷ Here Gillett was referring to urban sounds that were perceived as "brutal and oppressive." It was in this world of droning machines that post-World War II adolescents "staked out their freedom . . . inspired and reassured by the rock and roll beat."⁸

Gillett's conflation of adolescence and rock 'n' roll highlights the fact that the emergence of the music as a genre coincided with the beginnings of youth culture as a phenomenon. Due to the convergence of a number of social forces in the 1950s, including postwar affluence and a demographic shift in the population toward youth, teenagers became an identifiable consumer group and one that possessed an ample amount of disposable income. The music industry learned, albeit not without considerable resistance,