

ROCKIN' IN TIME

Third Edition

A Social History of Rock-and-Roll

David P. Szatmary

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To My Father and Mother

Preface

This book intends to be a social history of rock-and-roll. It will place an ever-changing rock music in the context of American and, to some extent, British history from roughly 1950 to 1994. *Rockin' in Time* tries to explain how rock-and-roll both reflected and influenced major social changes during the last 44 years.

Rockin' in Time emphasizes several main themes, including the importance of African-American culture in the origins and development of rock music. The blues, originating in the work songs of American slaves, provided the foundation for rock-and-roll. During the early 1950s, southern African-Americans who had migrated to Chicago created an urbanized electric rhythm and blues that preceded rock-and-roll and served as the testing ground for pioneer rock-and-rollers such as Little Richard and Chuck Berry. African-Americans continued to create such new styles as the Motown sound and the soul explosion of the 1960s, the disco beat of the next decade, and, most recently, rap music.

The new musical styles often coincided with and reflected the struggle of African-Americans for equality. The electric blues of Muddy Waters gained popularity amid the beginnings of the civil rights movement during the 1950s. In the early 1960s, as the movement for civil rights gained momentum, folk protesters such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez sang paeans about the cause. In 1964 and 1965, as Congress passed the most sweeping civil rights legislation since the Civil War, Motown artists topped the popular charts. When disgruntled, frustrated African-Americans took to the streets later in the decade, soul musicians such as Aretha Franklin shouted for respect. During the late eighties and into the nineties, hip-hoppers such

as Public Enemy rapped about inequality and a renewed interest in an African-American identity.

As the civil rights struggle began to foster an awareness and acceptance of African-American culture, rock-and-roll became accessible to white teenagers. Teens such as Elvis Presley listened to late-night rhythm-and-blues radio shows that started to challenge and break down racial barriers. During the 1960s, African-American performers such as the Ronettes, the Crystals, the Temptations, and the Supremes achieved mass popularity among both African-Americans and whites. By the 1980s, African-American entertainers such as Michael Jackson achieved superstar status. Throughout the last four decades, rock music has helped integrate white and black America.

A dramatic population growth during the postwar era, the second theme of this book, provided the audience for an African-American inspired rock-and-roll. After World War II, both the United States and Great Britain experienced a tremendous baby boom. By the mid-1950s, the baby boomers had become an army of youngsters who demanded their own music. Along with their older brothers and sisters who had been born during the war, they latched onto the new rock-and-roll, idolizing a young, virile Elvis Presley who represented the hordes of postwar youth.

Rock music appealed to and reflected the interests of the baby-boom generation until the end of the seventies. The music of the Dick Clark era, the Brill Building songwriters, the Beach Boys, the Motown artists, and the early Beatles showed a preoccupation with dating, cars, high school, and teen love. As the generation matured and entered college or the work force, the music scene became more serious and was dominated by the protest music of Bob Dylan and psychedelic bands which questioned basic tenets of American society. The music became harsh and violent when college-age baby boomers were threatened by the Vietnam-era military draft and the prospect of fighting in an unpopular war. During the 1970s, after the war ended and when many of the college rebels landed lucrative jobs, glitter rock and disco exemplified the excessive, self-centered behavior of the boomers. During the 1980s, such artists as Bruce Springsteen, who matured with his audience and celebrated his fortieth birthday by the end of the decade, reflected a yearning for lost youth. Rock-and-roll became the music of a new generation, called Generation X in the popular press, only after the late 1970s when punk, MTV, rap, and grunge defined the music.

The economic climate during the postwar era serves as a third focus of this book. Favorable economic times allowed rock to flourish among the baby-boom generation. Compared to the preceding generation, which had been raised during the most severe economic depression of the twentieth century, the baby boomers in the United States lived in relative affluence. In the 1950s and early 1960s, many youths had allowances that enabled them to purchase the latest rock records. During the next 15 years, unparalleled prosperity allowed youths to consider the alternatives of hippiedom and led to the excesses and unmatched record sales of the late 1970s. The economic scene began to worsen during the late 1970s in Britain, where a new generation of youths created the sneering protest of punk, which reflected harsh economic realities.

The importance of technological advances to the development of rock, enhancing the popularity of the music by delivering it easily and inexpensively, provides another framework for *Rockin' in Time*. The electric guitar, developed by Leo Fender and popularized during the 1950s, gave rock its distinctive sound. Television brought and still brings rock to teens in their homes—Elvis Presley and the Beatles on “The Ed Sullivan Show,” Dick Clark’s “American Bandstand,” and, currently, MTV. The portable transistor radio, and later the portable cassette tape player-recorder, provided teens the opportunity to listen to their favorite songs in the privacy of their rooms, at school, or on the streets. The inexpensive 45-rpm record allowed youths to purchase the latest hits and dominated rock sales until the 1960s, when the baby-boom generation grew older and could afford the price of an LP. Advances in the quality of sound such as high fidelity, stereo, component stereo systems, and recently the compact disc have brought the immediacy of the performance to the home.

The increasing popularity of rock music has been entwined with the development of the music industry, another focus of this book. Rock-and-roll has always been a business. At first, small independent companies such as Chess, Sun, Modern, and King recorded a commercially untested rock. As it became more popular among teens, rock-and-roll began to interest major record companies such as RCA, Decca, and Capitol, which by the 1960s dominated the field. By the 1970s, the major companies aggressively marketed their product and consolidated ranks to increase profits and successfully create an industry more profitable than network television and professional sports. In 1978, as the majors experienced a decline in sales, independent labels again arose to produce new rock styles such as punk, rap, and grunge. By the end of the 1980s, the major companies reasserted their dominance of the record industry, buoyed by the signing of new acts that had been tested by the independents and by the introduction of the compact disc, which lured many record buyers to purchase their favorite music in a different, more expensive format.

Though a business, rock music has been rebellious, which serves as the final theme of this book. Fueled by uncontrolled hormones, teenage rockers in the 1950s and early 1960s rebelled against their parents by wearing sideburns and long hair, driving fast cars, and screaming for the gyrations of Elvis Presley. In the 1960s, college-age rockers directed their frustration and anger at racial and social injustice, taking freedom rides to the South, demanding social change, and protesting the war in Vietnam. Entering the work force during the 1970s, many baby boomers submerged their anger in material excess as rock became theatrical and extravagant.

A new generation of rockers rekindled the flame of rebellion after the late 1970s. Sneering British punks, growing spiked hair, wearing ripped T-shirts, and spitting at their audiences, lashed out against economic and racial inequalities. Trying to foster a pride among African-Americans, rappers unabashedly condemned racial prejudice and its effects on African-Americans in the inner cities. In the 1990s, grunge musicians voiced the frustration and despair of their generation. Even older rock-and-rollers such as Bruce Springsteen committed themselves to specific causes such

as aid to African famine victims and the crusade against apartheid. Throughout much of its existence, rebellion defined rock-and-roll.

This book places the rebellion of rock in larger racial, demographic, technological, and economic frameworks. Rather than present an encyclopaedic compilation of the thousands of well-known and obscure bands that have played throughout the years, it deals with rock-and-rollers who reflected and sometimes changed the social fabric. It does not deal with many artists, some of my favorites, who never gained general popularity and remained outside the mainstream of rock.

Rockin' in Time also deals with musicians when they helped define an era. Though some creative rock musicians have changed with the times to create new styles of music that encapsulate several eras, most continue to record the music developed during their youth. This book deals with artists when they most fully reflected the world around them.

The social forces of history seldom separate into neat packages. Many of the different types of rock overlapped with one another. For example, from 1961 until the advent of the British invasion, the Brill Building songwriters, surf music, and Bob Dylan existed side by side on the charts. Though sometimes intersecting and cross-pollinating, the different periods in rock history have been divided into chapters to clearly distinguish the motivating factors behind each type of music.

Rockin' in Time tries to be as impartial as possible. Even though a book cannot be wrenched from the biases of its social setting, I have attempted to present the music in a social rather than a personal context and have tried to avoid any effusive praise or disparaging remarks about any type of rock. As Sting once said, "There is no bad music, only bad musicians."

These pages explore the social history of rock-and-roll. During the more than four decades that it has been an important part of American and British culture, rock-and-roll has reflected the frustrations, hopes, joys, fears, ambitions, and desires of two generations. The different forms rock music has assumed, some of them intensely defiant, have been influenced by and have themselves affected the social climate of the United States and Great Britain.

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The Blues, Rock-and-Roll, and Racism

"It used to be called boogie-woogie, it used to be called blues, used to be called rhythm and blues. . . . It's called rock now."

Chuck Berry

A smoke-filled club, the Macomba Lounge, on the South Side of Chicago, late on a Saturday night in 1950. On a small, dimly lit stage behind the bar in the long, narrow club stood an intense African-American dressed in a bright blue suit, baggy pants, a white shirt, and a wide striped tie. He gripped an oversized electric guitar—an instrument born in the postwar urban environment—caressing, pulling, pushing, and bending the strings until he produced a sorrowful, razor-sharp cry that cut into his listeners, who responded with loud shrieks. With half-closed eyes, the guitarist peered through the smoke and saw a bar jammed with patrons who nursed half-empty beer bottles. Growling out the lyrics of "Rollin' Stone," the man's face was contorted in a painful expression that told of cotton fields in Mississippi and the experience of African-Americans in Middle America at mid-century. The singer's name was Muddy Waters, and he was playing a new, electrified music called rhythm and blues.

The rhythm and blues of Muddy Waters and other urban blues artists served as the foundation for Elvis, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, and most other rock-and-rollers. A subtle blend of

African and European traditions, it provided the necessary elements and inspiration for the birth of rock and the success of Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Despite their innovative roles, R & B artists seldom received the recognition or the money they deserved. Established crooners, disc jockeys, and record company executives, watching their share of the market shrink with the increasing popularity of R & B and its rock-and-roll offspring, torpedoed the new music by offering toned-down, white copies of black originals that left many African-American trailblazers bitter and sometimes broken.

THE BIRTH OF THE BLUES

The blues were an indigenous creation of black slaves who adapted their African musical heritage to the American environment. Though taking many forms and undergoing many permutations through the years, the blues formed the basis of rock-and-roll.

Torn from their kin, enduring an often fatal journey from their homes in West Africa to the American South, and forced into a servile way of life, Africans retained continuity with their past through music. Their voices glided between the lines of the more rigid European musical scale to create a distinctive new sound. To the plantation owners and overseers, the music seemed to be “rising and falling” and sounded off-key.

The music involved calculated repetitions. In this call-and-response, used often to decrease the monotony of work, one slave would call or play a lead part, and his fellow workers would follow with the same phrase or an embellishment of it until another took the lead. As one observer wrote in 1845, “Our black oarsmen made the woods echo to their song. One of them, taking the lead, first improvised a verse, paying compliments to his master’s family, and to a celebrated black beauty of the neighborhood, who was compared to the ‘red bird.’ The other five then joined in the chorus, always repeating the same words.” Some slaves, especially those from the Bantu tribe, whooped, or jumped octaves, during the call-and-response which served as a basis for field hollers.

Probably most important, the slaves, accustomed to dancing and singing to the beat of drums in Africa, emphasized rhythm over harmony. In a single song they clapped, danced, and slapped their bodies in several different rhythms, compensating for the absence of drums, which were outlawed by plantation owners, who feared that the instrument would be used to coordinate slave insurrections. One ex-slave, writing in 1853, called the polyrhythmic practice “patting juba.” It was performed by “striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet and singing.” In contrast, noted President John Adams, whites “droned out [Protestant hymns] . . . like the braying of asses in one steady beat.”

African-Americans used these African musical traits in African-American religious ceremonies. One writer in the *Nation* described a