

# ROCK & ROLL

**ITS HISTORY AND  
STYLISTIC  
DEVELOPMENT**



**Joe Stuessy**

# ROCK AND ROLL

## Its History and Stylistic Development

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# chapter 1

## Introduction

### **WHY STUDY ROCK?**

Let us begin with the question, Why study rock and roll? One might reply somewhat flippantly, "Because it's there!" But the question deserves a more thoughtful answer than that.

First we must realize that rock and roll is basically and primarily a musical style. It utilizes the same musical elements (rhythm, pitch, dynamics, form, timbre, etc.) found in all styles of music. How these ingredients are combined, in what proportions and with what characteristics, defines rock as a distinct musical style.

As with all musical styles, there are some "good" examples, some "bad" examples, and a lot in between. It is as inaccurate to say that all rock is bad as to say that all classical music is good. Such musical value judgments should rest not upon a total style per se but upon how creatively and skillfully the musical creator uses the musical resources appropriate to the specific style.

But rock and roll is more than just a musical style. It is a very important and influential social factor. When the final figures are in from the second half of the twentieth century, rock will undoubtedly prove to be the single most potent economic factor in the multi-billion-dollar music industry. Musically, rock has influenced the music we hear on television, in films, and in commercials. It has influenced jazz, church music, classical music, and even its own ancestors, rhythm and blues, and country and western. Socially, the rock culture's influence has been felt in hairstyles, clothing, language, life-styles, and politics. In other words, any historian of the last half of our century must devote significant

consideration to rock and roll as one of the primary forces in our society as a whole (socially, culturally, economically, politically, and musically).

Any force that has that kind of impact on society deserves study. That is the purpose of this book.

## WHY THIS BOOK?

There is certainly no lack of written material on the subject of rock and roll. There are over two hundred books on Elvis Presley alone. There are several books that deal effectively with the general history of rock and roll. So why *this* book?

Obviously, one driving motivation for any author who sets out to write a book is that there is a *need* for that new book—specifically that it will either cover new areas of the general topic or cover previously discussed areas in a new way. This study of rock hopes to bring to the reader the history of rock and roll with four guiding principles in mind:

1. *Don't let the trees get in the way of the forest.* Many books on rock and roll make the admirable attempt to discuss virtually *every* rock-and-roll performer who ever plugged in a guitar or stepped up to a microphone. That is *not* the purpose of this study. Rather we have attempted to determine major trends and primary influential performers, thus painting the history of rock and roll in broad brushstrokes. The result is that many performers in the history of rock are only briefly mentioned in these pages, or not mentioned at all.

To write a study of contemporary (or recent) history in this way is to engage in a continuing exercise in self-control. When we approach the history of the sixteenth century, for example, we have an easier time identifying the main trends, most influential ideas, and principal characters. Our vantage point from five hundred years away allows us to take that perspective. We have the advantage of twenty-twenty hindsight and know with assurance what really proved to be important in light of subsequent human experience.

But when we look at our own times, our temporal closeness, although an advantage in some ways, is also our worst enemy. Our perspective is cluttered with details; we know *too much*! Therefore we must force ourselves repetitively to ask questions like, Was this really important in light of what followed? or Was this so-called new style or idea really a significant departure from that which preceded it?

It is hoped, then, that this study will provide the reader with a feeling for the evolution of rock and roll over a thirty-year period, not through a recitation of each and every detail along the way but by means of a broader representation of the general flow of styles, people, and ideas.

2. *Try to "tell it like it is."* Another pitfall of being too close to a subject is that one's personal biases may creep into the writing and prejudice the reader's perspective. As much as possible, we hope that histories are objectively written. But again, our closeness to the subject makes such objectivity difficult (for author and reader). It is fairly easy to be objective about some phenomenon of the fifteenth century, but we often have very strong feelings about ideas, events, and

people in our own lifetime. We are hardpressed to remain objective about something (such as music) that interacts with us at a very personal level.

Nevertheless, there has been a conscious attempt in this study to outline the history of rock as fairly as possible. Of course, any author is a distinct human being and therefore cannot totally escape his or her own peculiar perspective. Thus there is always some amount of the author's personality and philosophy reflected in his or her work, no matter how honest the attempt to achieve complete objectivity. Indeed, we should expect the historian to have subjective opinions about his or her subject. Such opinions, in fact, might prove particularly insightful to the reader. In the case of this book, such personal reflections have been stored up to be presented all in one chapter clearly labeled as such (see Chapter 15, "An Overview and an Editorial"). If the comments contained therein prove provocative or instructive, so be it; if not, perhaps they will prove interesting or at least entertaining.

**3. *Rock and roll is, first and foremost, music.*** Rock and roll is many things: It is show biz; it is money; it is record contracts, Top 40 radio, and role models; it is all this and much more. But strip all that away and one still comes to one inescapable fact: Rock and roll is a musical style. Many books speak of performers' lives, tell amusing anecdotes, reveal sales statistics, chronicle albums and songs, and analyze lyrics, but neglect to describe what is fundamental to all of the above: the music. Although the current study will include the foregoing elements, it will also address the basic question, What, musically speaking, is rock and roll?

It is assumed that most readers will not be conversant with the technical aspects of music (if you are, so much the better!). Thus each chapter includes a section that discusses a specific aspect of the *music* of rock and roll. These sections, called musical close-ups, focus on a particular aspect of the music itself. (The organization of Chapter 2 is a little different; it has three musical close-ups—one following each of the three main topic areas.) In some of the musical close-ups various elements of the music are discussed (for example, rhythm, melody, form, or texture). In other close-ups related musical topics are addressed (for example, improvisation or lyrics); and in two chapters (11 and 12) specific pieces of music are analyzed in detail.

It is hoped that this approach will remind the reader that the person who is knowledgeable about rock music must know more than album titles, song lyrics, sales charts, and performers' lives. Whereas understanding the social, economic, and political implications of rock and roll is of great importance, understanding the music is fundamental.

**4. *Rock and roll is an important part of society.*** Rock and roll has not existed in a vacuum. Quite the contrary, it has had a vital and active interrelationship with the general society. Various aspects of this interrelationship (social, economic, and political) will be discussed as appropriate within each chapter. But in addition to that, each chapter begins with an overview. These overview sections provide a general introduction to each chapter's topic, setting the scene for what is to follow. As appropriate, the overview section may discuss where a particular style came from, how it fits into a broader historical perspective, and how it interrelates with other aspects of society.



## BEFORE WE BEGIN: A LIBERAL VIEW OF ROCK HISTORY

When we speak of “musical snobs,” many people immediately think of the stereotyped classical musician or classical-music lover. But in fact, musical snobs come in many forms. For example, there are several varieties of jazz snobs. One variety feels that jazz is the “only true American music,” dismissing rock, for example, as a rather decadent musical corruption and a mindless glob of musical nonsense. Even *within* jazz there are specialists in snobbery. Some, for instance, feel that the early Dixieland jazz was “the only true and classic jazz,” with all that follows being a declining aberration of a once pure style. Others feel that the “bop” style of the mid- and late 1940s was the apex of jazz history, viewing all that preceded as preparatory and that which followed as subsequent decline. Some look at a very popular jazz style such as swing (the big-band-era music) and vehemently assert that “it isn’t jazz at all!”

Similarly in rock and roll we have our resident snobs. Like the jazz fan, they identify one particular style (such as the Beatles, or Jimi Hendrix, or the Presley–Little Richard style) as the “real” rock and roll and dismiss most other styles with words of damnation, such as “soft rock,” “wimp rock,” “bubblegum rock,” or (worst of all) “commercial junk!” Usually comments such as these reveal more about the person making the statement than about the music being discussed. Perhaps an accurate translation of these lofty statements would be, “The style *I* like is *real* rock; other styles are not.” This is, to say the least, a very narrow-minded and egocentric view of musical style. Perhaps a better perspective is to say, “I prefer this particular style, but I recognize that there are many other legitimate styles which others may prefer.”

This study opts for the latter, rather liberal view. Rock is interpreted here to be a very broad generic term under which a diverse subsystem of styles can legitimately exist. The list of substyles is mindboggling: rockabilly, country rock, folk rock, jazz rock, hard rock, soft rock, punk rock, heavy-metal rock, Latin rock, progressive rock, disco, fusion, new wave, reggae, glitter rock, art rock—the list could go on and on. Many such labels are simply the artificial creations of the media and the public-relations persons who must somehow promote yet another rock band as being somehow “new” and “different.” Often there is little or nothing new, different, or significant, and the stylistic label has virtually no musical meaning. To give too much credence to this myriad of ministyles would lead to utter bewilderment on the part of the student of rock history. Therefore we shall propose a very broad organizational pattern for the history of rock.

As we shall see in Chapters 2 and 3, the early formation of rock resulted from the flowing together (in unequal proportions) of three preexisting styles: pop, country and western, and rhythm and blues. Somewhat later a second infusion came from jazz, folk music, gospel, and classical music (again in unequal proportions). These, then, are the seven basic styles that have flowed into the creation and development of rock.

In some instances these tributaries flowed together into an integrated mainstream in which the individual donors lost their distinct identities in the mixture known as rock and roll. But in other cases elements of one of the tributaries retained a distinctive presence and created a shading of rock and roll closer to

the tributary's original identity. As an example of this, consider pop music (discussed in Chapter 2). In some ways pop elements were absorbed into early rock and roll. But we must also note that there has always been a softer side of rock that favors one of its direct ancestors: pop.

In this way rock is very much like a child as related to parents and grandparents. To a large extent the child is a blend of characteristics (in unequal proportions) of all these direct ancestors. The child has his or her own distinct looks and personality; he is not a carbon copy of any one ancestor but is an indefinable mixture. Nevertheless, as he or she develops there are certain characteristics and behaviors that occasionally remind us very distinctly of one of the parents or grandparents. For example, as the child reaches adolescence, he or she may develop a body build very much like Dad's or display a natural talent for music, reminding us of his or her maternal grandmother.

Two colossal entities will appear in this history of rock music. In some ways they are similar, but they serve very different purposes. The first, Elvis Presley, was able to bring together the three tributary streams that led to rock and roll and embody them all within himself. At times he was the indefinable mixture; at other times he set one or another of rock's ancestors into clear relief. He was the master chef who blended the ingredients into a new dish without, however, allowing the distinctiveness of each ingredient to be destroyed.

As with Presley, the incalculable value of the Beatles was their musical breadth. Through their leadership, they pulled rock together one last time and slung it into the future in a variety of fragmented quantities. They were like the boy playing in the snow who gathers up a huge handful of snow, compresses it into a simple ball, and then hurls it into the air only to see it fragment into dozens of pieces.

Let us begin in the early 1950s—a time when almost no one had heard the term “rock and roll,” or had any idea of the musical and social revolution that was about to occur.

## chapter 2

# The Roots of Rock

### **OVERVIEW: THE EARLY FIFTIES**

#### **The General Society**

Compared with the decades that preceded and followed, the decade of the 1950s was a good one. The late 1920s to mid-1930s were years of extreme financial pressure. The early 1940s were consumed by the most destructive war the world has ever known. And in the late 1940s the United States was involved in a “police action” (war) in Korea. The decade following the 1950s was one of the most turbulent in our nation’s history, a time of social and political unrest as well as war (Viet Nam).

Preceded and followed by turbulent decades, the 1950s seem serene and comfortable. Certainly no decade is trouble-free. Even the 1950s witnessed several dramatic issues: Senator Joe McCarthy stirred up considerable controversy regarding the invasion of American society by communism. The Supreme Court issued a landmark decision in 1954 that declared the policy of “separate but equal” education for blacks and whites to be unconstitutional. A lingering fear of “the bomb” caused many people to build bomb shelters in their backyards and prompted schools to hold weekly air-raid drills.

But in general things were relatively good. General Dwight Eisenhower was inaugurated as president in 1953. The economy stabilized with little or no inflation. There was a feeling of well-being throughout the nation. After years of war and depression, American society was finally able to settle down and go on with the business of progress. Families looked forward to a stable and relatively predictable future. The game plan was clear: do well in school; go to college; marry