

FOREFATHERS AND EARLY INFLUENCES



JIMMIE RODGERS
September 8th, 1897
Meridian, Mississippi
Died May 26th, 1933
New York City

If Jimmie Rodgers is generally thought of as the Father of Country Music, he must be rock's great-grandfather. In the six years that preceded Rodgers' death, from 1927 to 1933, he was a major part of the fledgling phonograph-music industry. Whether singing tales of the railroad, celebrating the West, bringing the blues around to a new folk form or touching on more pop elements, his yodel has come down to us as the seminal influence, the touchstone, where it all began.

Rodgers went to work with his father on the railroad at age fourteen. Absorbing work songs and chants from the men on his father's crew, he stayed on as a brakeman until tuberculosis forced him to retire. Unable to work on the railroad anymore, he turned to music, playing in a medicine show and performing in blackface for a time.

By 1927, the Jimmie Rodgers Entertainers were preparing to meet Victor talent scout Ralph S. Peer. Peer advised Jimmie to go it alone, and on August 4th, 1927, he first put his voice to wax. The "Blue Yodels" that came out of those and subsequent sessions were an indication of the kind of musical cross-fertilization that has since become America's music: mournful Appalachian hill ballads, soulful black spirituals, blues and white mainstream pop — all harbingers of rock.

He held the tuberculosis at bay for another six years. Hoping to provide for his family, he entered Victor's Twenty-fourth Street Studios in New York to sing his last sides, resting on a cot between takes. On May 26th, 1933, his lonesome locomotive whistle disappeared into the far horizon, the blue yodel of them all.

ROBERT JOHNSON
May 8th, 1911
Hazelhurst, Mississippi
Died August 16th, 1938
Greenwood, Mississippi

Robert Johnson stands at the crossroads of American music, much as it is rumored that he once stood at a Mississippi crossroads and sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his unique musical gifts. His life and art, hopelessly intermingled because of the few facts we know about him, are symbolic of the folk blues as they passed from the delta to the secular world, and of the psychic toll exacted on those who embraced a dark midnight, knowing they would never witness the dawn to follow.

It is easy to romanticize Johnson's life, and, indeed, part of his perennial attraction lies in his stark, melodramatic legend rather than the undeniable power of his music. Yet he is the link between the hard-core rural blues preserved in field recordings from the Twenties and the more sophisticated city blues that blossomed in the wake of World War II.

Born in Hazelhurst, Mississippi, in 1911, Johnson learned at the knee of Son House before beginning his wandering ways. The first modern bluesman, he was influenced as much by what he heard from records (alluded to in his "Phonograph Blues") as he did from his contemporaries. On November 23rd, 1936, in a San Antonio, Texas, hotel room, he made his first recordings: such classics as "Terraplane Blues" (equating sexuality with an automobile) and "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom." In "Crossroads Blues," he pleads for "mercy, save poor Bob, if you please." His anguish would become literally terrifying by the time he recorded "Hell Hound on My Trail," "Me and the Devil Blues" and "Love in Vain," among others, in Dallas on June 19th, 1937. It would be his final session.

In August 1938, he was poisoned by a jealous husband. When John Hammond searched for Johnson to join his landmark *Spirituals to Swing* concert at Carnegie Hall, the bluesman was already buried off Highway 7. Rumors that Johnson was playing an electric guitar and leading a small band before his death must be counted as just that — mere hearsay — unless one looks at the careers of Muddy Waters, Elmore James, Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones. Who knows how the fine print in that crossroads contract might have read?



JIMMY YANCEY
February 20th, 1898
Chicago, Illinois
Died September 17th, 1951

Jimmy Yancey put the boogie-woogie in rock and roll. This rhythmic accompaniment for a blues melody was an important piano style of the 1920s and '30s that took root in Chicago, where its bottom-edged beat made it a favorite backdrop for rent parties and renegade jazz jams alike.

Yancey, who had hits like "State Street Special" and "Yancey's Stomp," played a version of barrelhouse piano that was dance music, pure and simple. Using repetitive cross-rhythmic patterns that seemed more xylophonic than pianistic, Yancey bounced the percussive accents of his right hand off the rolling bass of his left, creating a dissonance and glissando that stemmed directly from the African tributary of America's pop river. He polished his act as a buck-and-wing dancer in vaudeville, but in 1925, at age twenty-seven, he left the stage to become a groundskeeper for the Chicago White Sox.

When boogie-woogie was popularized by Vocalion's 1928 release of "Pine Top's Boogie Woogie," it was Clarence Smith who popped the cork on the champagne. Yancey was still working alongside such contemporary keyboard giants as Meade Lux Lewis and Albert Ammons — and he played many a "Five O'Clock Blues" to welcome the dawn at nocturnal affairs — but he didn't record until May 1939, when barkeeper Dan Quayley set up one of the first home recorders to capture his magic.

By then, Yancey had smoothed out the rougher edges of his brand of boogie and given it a litig, melodic lift that gracefully enhanced the surging boogie-woogie power of such classics as "Midnight Stomp" and "Death Letter Blues." On September 17th, 1951, never having strayed far from his native Windy City, Yancey went to that great after-hours joint in the sky.

ROCK!

ROCK!

ROCK!



Mickey and Sylvia



Royal Teens



Screamin' Jay Hawkins

THE SURPRISE OF AN AMERICAN MUSIC BY LENNY KAYE

But I can't remember where or when . . . did rock and roll begin?

Was a new era dawning on July 5th, 1954, when Sam Phillips spoke the immortal words – “That’s fine, man. Hell, that’s different. That’s a pop song now” – to Elvis Presley over a studio intercom at 760 Union Avenue in Memphis?

Was it March 31st, 1955, when *The Blackboard Jungle* formally equated Bill Haley’s “Rock around the Clock” with juvenile delinquency, providing a theme song for adolescent rebellion?

Or was it the early Fifties crossover success of the Chords’ “Sh-Boom,” the Penguins’ “Earth Angel,” the Crows’ “Gee,” Big Joe Turner’s “Shake, Rattle and Roll” and a Cleveland disc jockey’s prescience in taking the “race records” known as rhythm and blues and changing their name to attract (or acknowledge) a multiracial audience?

The truth is that despite an all-too-human urge to define music in neat bloodlines, the roots of rock and roll remain frustratingly elusive. As much a self-conscious lifestyle as a collection of rhythms and melodies, it seemed to pick at will from the discards of other music forms, recycling scorned chords and pariah riffs.

This is not to say rock and rollers were

merely secondhand musicians – though that’s how they were generally regarded by their professional peers. Primitive or not, these were aware and deliberate creators – often driven visionaries – whose goal was simplicity instead of intricacy. Reacting against the passivity of audience-performer interaction, rock celebrated and indulged its subliminal urges. It cracked one beat in place of six and projected lyrics naked in their unadorned desire, along with melodic phrases so pointed they became mnemonic hooks, as America’s (and later the world’s) Top Forty charts would soon devastatingly learn.

The subculture offered was part Atomic Age and part Media Modern, stepping back from the siege mentality of postwar paranoia. Times were good in the mid-Fifties. Smokestack America was booming; the pay of a factory worker with three dependents averaged seventy dollars a week. *Time* magazine said that along with the highest Gross National Product in history, “bomb shelters were on sale in Los Angeles, and hardly anyone was buying them.” President Eisenhower heralded a return to confidence, while Davy Crockett was the national hero.

But did the public like Davy because he said things like “Be sure you’re right, then go ahead,” or because his coonskin cap and

sacrificial life-is-art swan song at the Alamo offered some grander purpose than mere prosperity? James Dean’s meteoric rise to fame in the six months between his March 1955 screen appearance in *East of Eden* and his own flaming demise (the self-fulfilling prophecy of *Rebel without a Cause*) promoted similar existential questions. It was only when the newly ubiquitous medium of television met rock’s first icon, Elvis Presley, that rock became something more than music. It went pop.

Projected into millions of unsuspecting living rooms, as important for what he couldn’t show (the famous waist bisection) as for what he did (gold records galore), Elvis not only combined the tangled musical strains of rock’s prehistory into a sultry whole, he took a mutated step forward. His was an inspirational leadership that came to embody the new music itself. Long live the King!

His – and, by extension, rock’s – was an electric sound, tilting the balance from amplification to AC current. You could hear it in the slapback echo with which Phillips surrounded Presley’s voice in “That’s All Right” and in the bite of Scotty Moore’s electric guitar. It seemed tailor-made for “Hi-Fi,” a car radio, a *live* stage show.

And yet, as much as rock and roll was



Chantels

“specialty” music, but certainly influential styles in their own right. Vocal techniques and improvisations from the blues; a hard, big-band swing; the call-and-response of gospel; the dance blues of New Orleans; the frantic bop of West Coast jazz; the twang of hillbilly boogie and western swing; the close-harmony serenade of groups like the Ink Spots and the Four Freshmen – all of these found their way into rock and roll. “Rock and roll was probably the first music with regional origins to be commercially

Roy Brown



Moonglows

expanded its rock and roll record chart from 30 to 100 songs on November 12th, 1955 – not so coincidentally, the same month that Colonel Tom Parker signed Elvis to recording giant RCA-Victor.

Pop music’s older guard had initially tried to subvert rock’s emotional intensity with sanitized cover versions; they hoped that all this loud bravado would soon go away. But they never stood a chance. The swappfest between rhythm, blues, country, western and plain old Tin Pan Alley continued wildly apace. In the hands of maverick independent labels and their equally unruly artists, a marketplace free-for-all was initiated that harked back to the days of the frontier West.

“This is what makes rock and roll so intriguing,” Nick Tosches notes in his chronicle of the “dark and wild” years before Elvis, *Unsung Heroes of Rock ‘n’ Roll*. “Whether one regards it as art or as business, its history – one of greed and innocence, tastelessness and brilliance, the ridiculous and the sublime (not to mention sex, violence and pink silk suits) – is a fun-house-mirror reflection of the American dream gone gaga.”

If we can’t pinpoint our opening “where or when” question, the who, what and how that make up the raw materials of this Rock



presented as a strikingly original concept when it came along, it was a product of the same frantic bartering of style that has characterized American music since there was an American music to speak of. Elvis was hardly a surprise, given all that had come before. What was amazing was how much he foreshadowed all that was yet to come.

Beginning almost two centuries ago, social lines – be they drawn along class, racial or economic boundaries – have proved most porous where music is concerned. This melting pot of sound has brought vitality to American music – be it folk, jazz, country, western, blues or other – which sees styles evolve in a virulent democracy at a sometimes bewildering pace.

For those who think in terms of black and white, there are only shades of gray. Performance styles and rhythms imported directly from Africa found Anglo-Irish harmonies and melodies greeting them on their arrival to the new continent. Playing the game of one-upping dozens, rudiments of style were exchanged, helped along by a growth in mass communication that made once-regional styles accessible to a national audience.

By the late Forties, this had resulted in several unique genres, most still considered

successful on a nationwide scale,” writes Charlie Gillett in *The Sound of the City*, and small wonder, since it managed to touch so many reference points along the way.

Add to rock and roll the manic exhibitionism of youthful exuberance, the sense of contrariety that kept the music moving further out on its own limb of the family tree, and the outrage (and subsequent attraction) it could provoke, and the result was music that had an explosive impact on America in the Fifties. It would be a high-exclusive national phenomenon until the decade turned. At that point, it would be reflected back across the Atlantic with a vengeance by the British Invasion, and it would take over the pop charts to the extent that rock and roll became the dominant American music. *Billboard* acknowledged the transition when it

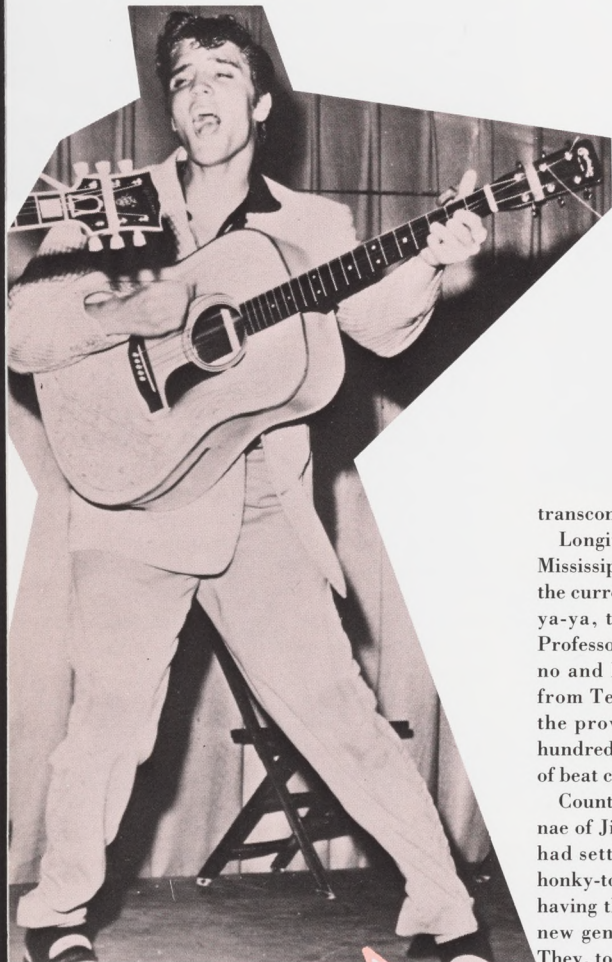


Diablos



Cleftones

ROCK! ROCK!



Elvis Presley

and Roll Hall of Fame are more readily available. Their names and faces, legendary hits and divine misses, not only prefigure the portraits on the walls, but are the very walls themselves. A guided tour of this labyrinth quickly loses its way along corridors that overlap and encircle. Luckily, you're never lost for long. You can pin the tail anywhere on the donkey of rock and roll.

In Chicago, the bedrock blues brought up from the deep Delta South gradually took on a more urban character. Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf begat Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, while the church harmony of a thousand congregations took flight in the Moonglows or a "bird" group like the Flamingos (see also Orioles, Cardinals, Robins, Sparrows, Wrens, Meadowlarks, et al.).

On the West Coast, a lively rhythm and blues scene zoot-suited into Los Angeles "jump" blues and "cool" blues, the archetypal Fast Song and Slow Song: Amos Milburn backed with Charles Brown. Linking with the "Harlem Hit Parade" of Louis Jordan and Wynonie Harris that swept the Northeast, a golden spike was laid in the



Five Satins

transcontinental railway of a nascent rock.

Longitudinally, the music moved up the Mississippi River from New Orleans, against the current. From out of the heart of gumbo ya-ya, the insistent piano-roll triplets of Professor Longhair gave way to Fats Domino and Little Richard. An arc stretching from Texas across the Carolinas brought the proverbial bop that wouldn't stop to hundreds of thousands of fans — a crescent of beat centered on two and four.

Country music, tying together the personae of Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams, had settled its first pioneer generation in honky-tonkin' towns throughout the South, having their children and watching a whole new genealogy of musicians come of age. They, too, caught the amped-up fever of the times, sticking their dancing feet into Carl Perkins' "Blue Suede Shoes" and doing the "Be-Bop-a-Lula" to Gene Vincent. Under the generic name of rockabilly, it became a sound all its own, driven to unimaginable heights by Elvis, but part of the wet dream of every duck- and pony-tailed *yon' teenager* (as Philadelphia disc jockey Jerry Blavat would christen his listeners).

It was when all these intermarried musics met the pop process that rock and roll be-



Elegants

gan. In calling it rock and roll, a sensibility of separation was initiated that helped the bandwagon move under its own propulsive power. Disc jockey Alan Freed, tipped by record-store owner Leo Mintz of the across-the-board appeal of rhythm and blues, "officially" changed the music's name, in effect defining this new audience. Thus given its own fork in the road, rock proceeded to strike off resolutely on its own.

The catchall phrase Freed chose was a combination of two R&B slang expressions that had been around for at least three decades. Like jazz, it was yet another synonym for that most musical of interpersonal acts. Nick Tosches has traced it back to the fall of 1922, when blues singer Trixie Smith recorded "My Daddy Rocks Me (with One Steady Roll)" for Black Swan. By the Forties, "rock" (not to mention "roll") had become a full-fledged adjective denoting a hard, crisp, beat-oriented music on the order of "Good Rockin' Tonight" (Roy Brown), "All She Wants to Do Is Rock" (Wynonie Harris), "Rockin' the House" (Memphis Slim) and even Wild Bill Moore's "We're Gonna Rock."

The Fifties saw this rock slide become an avalanche: "Rockin' Blues" (Johnny Otis), "Rockin' Rhythm" (Pee Wee Barnum), "We're Gonna Rock" (Gunter Lee Carr, a.k.a. Cecil Gant), "Rock, Rock, Rock" (Amos Milburn) and, in keeping with the tempo of the times, "Rock, H-Bomb, Rock," by the irrepressible H-Bomb Ferguson.

What's more, the musical trade-off between material and style was becoming overt instead of covert. Already, hits on the rhythm and blues charts were being reversioned for country and western artists, and vice versa. The formerly inviolable pop charts were invaded by the new sound, exemplified by the Dominoes' "Sixty Minute Man," Bill Haley's "Crazy Man Crazy" and



Penguins



ROCK!



Skyliners



the Charms' "Hearts of Stone." If this was commercial, an event like Freed's Moondog Coronation Ball showed the tip of a demographic iceberg. Held in March 1952 at the Cleveland Arena, it allowed the audience to glimpse one another in the flesh and witness their own power. Instead of the expected capacity crowd of 10,000, there were 30,000 eager fans pouring through the turnstiles, which resulted in rock's first riot.

Once the floodgates were declared open, things began to, ah, roll. The public's imagination may have been captured by Elvis, but the vast legions of musicians and entrepreneurs were ready, willing and able to follow him through the pearly gates of entertainment paradise. Suddenly unleashed, rock burst over America in a great wave, carrying with it a grand sense of possibility, of the new taking over the old.

Perhaps that's the way it seems at the start of a revolution. Maybe a revolution always reacts against what came before, at once predictable and shocking. Surely, other radical fusions of form had taken place in American music. What made rock and roll so different was its sudden flaring into consciousness, heralded by a modern communications media with an ability to drum the message throughout the technological world.

Everybody wanted to be a rocker, and the distinction between fan and performer was blurred by the music's accessibility. Three chords and stardom. Throughout America, each geographic region contributed a particular legacy to the rock and roll mythos. In New York, a doo-wop group held court on every street corner in the five boroughs - whether the Harptones or Frankie

Lymon and the Teenagers, from upper Manhattan; the Cletones, from Jamaica, Queens; Dion and the Belmonts, from the Belmont Avenue subway station in the Bronx; the Mystics, the Passions and the Paragons, from Brooklyn; or the Elegants from Staten Island. Their "hitting notes" were shaped to nonsense chants and chimed thirds, bass through high tenor.

They were heard by the tunesmiths of the Brill Building on Broadway, who sculpted for them songs whose pantheonic scrollwork was astonishing. These pop masterminds instantly turned to packaging a Teen Idol prototype, though fittingly enough it was in Philadelphia, home of Dick Clark's televised *American Bandstand*, that the Fabians and Frankie Avalons were launched toward a heartthrobbing multitude. Along with the cheese-steak hero, Philly was also

famous for its falsetto singing groups. Let us now praise the Capris ("God Only Knows") and the Castelles.

Southern Gothic reared its head in rockabilly, which wreaked havoc below the Mason-Dixon line. Elvis' sound was regional for these gone cats and hillbillies on speed, and they created a momentum so headlong that it would come back to haunt them a quarter of a century later with a full-blown revival. Bill Haley provided the formal definition when he put the big beat of rhythm and blues in a western swing setting and recorded it in New York's Pythian Temple to give it a rim-shot edge; and it was carried to breathless extremes by such train-kept-a-rollin' ravers as the Johnny Burnette Trio, Wanda Jackson ("Fujiyama Mama") and Billy Lee Riley ("Flying Saucers Rock 'n' Roll").

The air of supernatural possession was best summed up by Screamin' Jay Hawkins' "I Put a Spell on You," from 1956. By then, rock and roll was doubling back on itself, influencing its source musics, a dizzying cloverleaf that never did find a straightaway. As pop music had opened to rhythm and blues and country, these styles in turn opened to pop, the tension of their compromise broadening the struggle between real and surreal, lost and found.

Groups like the Coasters and the Drifters; solo artists like Clyde McPhatter, Jackie Wilson and Ben E. King; instrumentalists like Duane Eddy and King Curtis; resolute bluesmen like B.B. King and Bobby "Blue" Bland; superb voices like La Vern Baker and Joe Turner; teen idols like Ricky Nelson and Dion; Hank Ballard's blue side of rhythm; Johnny Otis' rhythm side of blues; the "C.C. Rider" of Chuck Willis and the "Sleep" of Little Willie John; the orchestrated heads-and-tails of Bobby Darin and Roy Orbison; the yet-to-come of Marvin Gaye and Smokey Robinson; the live-fast-die-young of Eddie Cochran and Johnny Ace; Ruth Brown, Lloyd Price, Jimmy Reed. . . .

The list could go on and on. And still does.

Welcome to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.



Wynonie Harris



Gene Vincent and his Blue Caps