Rock `n´ Roll: A Social History

“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

“Rock and roll is a means of pulling the white man down to the level of the Negro. It is part of a plot to undermine the morals of the youth of our nation.”

Secretary of the North Alabama White Citizens Council, circa 1956

“[Rock and roll is] the most brutal, ugly desperate, vicious form of expression it has been my misfortune to hear. [It is written and sung] for the most part by cretinous goons [and] by means of its imbecilic reiterations and sly – lewd – in fact plain dirty – lyrics … [It] manages to be the martial music for every sideburned delinquent on the face of the earth.”

Frank Sinatra

“Rock `n´ roll, man, it changed my life. It was like the Voice of America, the real America, coming to your home.”

Bruce Springsteen

“For some of us, it began late at night: huddled under bedroom covers with our ears glued to a radio pulling in black voices charged with intense emotion and propelled by a wildly kinetic rhythm through the after-midnight static. Growing up in the white-bread America of the Fifties, we had never heard anything like it, but we reacted, or remember reacting, instantaneously and were converted. We were believers before we knew what it was that had so spectacularly ripped the dull, familiar fabric of our lives. We asked our friends, maybe an older brother or sister. We found out that they called it rock & roll. It was so much more vital and alive than any music we had ever heard before that it needed a new category: Rock & roll was much more than new music for us. It was an obsession and a way of life.”

Robert Palmer
It’s only rock ‘n’ roll but I like it – so the song goes. But is it only rock ‘n’ roll? Clearly rock music has been a continuing thread in the fabric of post-World War II American culture. Rock ‘n’ roll has not merely mirrored the enormous social and cultural upheavals of the mid- to late-20th century, it has shaped them as well. “Race music” – the music that shocked many white Americans in the ‘50s – yielded to provocative sounds that provided the musical soundtrack for “the sixties,” fueling the civil rights, anti-war, and other social protest movements of the turbulent era. As the mood of the nation shifted to what cultural critic Tom Wolfe has labeled the “me decade” of the ‘70s, the music shifted as well; it was an era in which some claim rock lost its center, becoming scattered and fragmented. And then, the ‘80s. And MTV. Did video really kill the radio star?

This course will examine rock ‘n’ roll – its historical and musical roots, its explosive beginnings in the mid-1950s, and its rise to cultural dominance – to explore issues of race, gender, and class amidst the rapidly changing social, cultural, economic, and political landscape of mid- to late-20th century United States.

Texts:

Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis.*


Film: *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes.* (optional)
Class Requirements, Grading:

40% midterm exam
60% final exam

Class Schedule:

Tuesday, June 26  “Rock ‘n’ Roll is Here to Stay”
course overview
VIEW: *Rock ‘n’ Roll Explodes*

Thursday, June 28  “It’s Only Rock ‘n’ Roll But I Like It”
LECTURE: The roots of rock ‘n’ roll - part 1
VIEW: *That Rhythm, Those Blues*

Tuesday, July 3  “It’s Still Rock ‘n’ Roll to Me”
LECTURE: The roots of rock ‘n’ roll – part 2
VIEW: *Stephen Foster*
Thursday, July 5  “Teen Angel”
LECTURE: The invention of the teenager
VIEW: Blackboard Jungle (clip)
What About Juvenile Delinquency? (clip)
The Fifties: The Fear and the Dream
READ: Rolling Stone, pp.102-129.

Tuesday, July 10  “The Times They Are A-Changin’”
LECTURE: The sounds of integration
VIEW: Emmett Till
READ: Rolling Stone, pp.130-176.
Race, Rock, and Elvis

MIDTERM EXAM REVIEW

Thursday, July 12  MIDTERM EXAM

Tuesday, July 17  “If I Had a Hammer”
LECTURE: Songs of conscience and concern
VIEW: Berkeley in the Sixties, Parts 1&2
Plugging In
READ: Rolling Stone, pp. 299-331.
Thursday, July 19  “You Say You Want a Revolution”  
LECTURE: The British invasion  
VIEW: Britain Invades, America Fights Back  
READ: Rolling Stone, pp.192-259.

Tuesday, July 24  “Play That Funky Music”  
LECTURE: Who ARE the Funk Brothers??  
VIEW: Standing in the Shadows of Motown  
READ: Rolling Stone, pp.177-191, 260-298, 332-347.

Thursday, July 26  ** 7pm ** GUEST PERFORMANCE  
“A Cultural Cadence: From Hollers to Hip Hop

Tuesday, July 31  “I Want to Take You Higher”  
LECTURE: Sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll  
VIEW: Gimme Shelter  
READ: Rolling Stone, pp.348-428, 474-479.

FINAL EXAM REVIEW

Thursday, August 2  FINAL EXAM
Class Guidelines:

ATTENDANCE. Since we meet for 3-1/2 hours each night we obviously will be covering much material each class session; attendance, therefore, is mandatory. Please see me if you need to miss class, keeping in mind that absences will be excused only for illness or other extenuating circumstances. Unexcused absences will result in a lower final grade.

We will take a 15 minute break each class. Using the scheduled break time to make phone calls, get snacks, etc., will minimize interruptions during lectures, discussions and films.

Students are responsible for ALL class material, whether or not you attend class. If you are absent please check with someone to see what you’ve missed.

Videos/DVDs viewed in class are as important as lectures and reading assignments. I encourage you to take notes while viewing. The midterm and final exams will ask you to refer to the films as well as readings and lecture material.

Feel free to email me – I will try to respond as quickly as possible. While I don’t have regularly scheduled office hours I’d be happy to meet with you before or after class.

ROCK & ROLL MUSIC
Chuck Berry

Just let me hear some of that Rock and roll music,
Any old way you choose it;
Its got a back beat, you cant lose it,
Any old time you use it.
Its gotta be rock and roll music,
If you want to dance with me,
If you want to dance with me.

Ive got no kick againt modern jazz,
Unless they try to play it too darn fast;
And change the beauty of the melody,
Until they sounded like a symphony,
Thats why I go for that Rock and roll music ...

I took my loved one over cross the tracks
So she can hear my man await a sax,

I must admit the have a rockin band,
Man they were going like a hurricane
Thats why I go for that Rock and roll music ....

Way down south they gave a jubilee,
The jockey folks they had a jamboree,
Theyre drinkin homebrew from a water cup,
The folks dancin they all got shook up
And started playin that Rock and roll music ....

Dont care to hear em play a tango,
Im in the mood to dig a mambo;
Its way to early for a congo,
So keep a rockin that piano
So I can hear some of that Rock and roll music ...