



▲ Chuck Berry is as much known for his “duck walk” as for his electric guitar-playing heard on hit records including “Johnny B. Goode” and “Maybellene.”

ROCK ‘N’ ROLL In the early and mid-1950s, Richard Penniman, Chuck Berry, Bill Haley and His Comets, and especially Elvis Presley brought rock ‘n’ roll to a frantic pitch of popularity among the newly affluent teens who bought their records. The music’s heavy rhythm, simple melodies, and lyrics—featuring love, cars, and the problems of being young—captivated teenagers across the country.

Elvis Presley, the unofficial “King of Rock ‘n’ Roll,” first developed his musical style by singing in church and listening to gospel, country, and blues music on the radio in Memphis, Tennessee. When he was a young boy, his mother gave him a guitar, and years later he paid four dollars of his own money to record two songs in 1953. Sam Phillips, a rhythm-and-blues producer, discovered Presley and produced his first records. In 1955, Phillips sold Presley’s contract to RCA for \$35,000.

Presley’s live appearances were immensely popular, and 45 of his records sold over a million copies, including “Heartbreak Hotel,” “Hound Dog,” “All Shook Up,” “Don’t Be Cruel,” and “Burning Love.” Although *Look* magazine dismissed him as “a wild troubadour who wails rock ‘n’ roll tunes, flails erratically at a guitar, and wriggles like a peep-show dancer,” Presley’s rebellious style captivated young audiences. Girls screamed and fainted when he performed, and boys tried to imitate him. E

Not surprisingly, many adults condemned rock ‘n’ roll. They believed that the new music would lead to teenage delinquency and immorality. In a few cities, rock ‘n’ roll concerts were banned. But despite this controversy, television and radio exposure helped bring rock ‘n’ roll into the mainstream, and it became more acceptable by the end of the decade. Record sales, which were 189 million in 1950, grew with the popularity of rock ‘n’ roll, reaching 600 million in 1960.

MAIN IDEA

Making Inferences

E Based on Elvis Presley’s song titles, what do you think were teenagers’ concerns in the 1950s?

History Through Music

“HOUND DOG”— A ROCK ‘N’ ROLL CROSSOVER

Few examples highlight the influence African Americans had on rock ‘n’ roll—and the lack of credit and compensation they received for their efforts—more than the story of Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton.

In 1953, she recorded and released the song “Hound Dog” to little fanfare. She received a mere \$500 in royalties. Only three years later, Elvis Presley recorded a version of the tune, which sold millions of records. Despite her contributions, Thornton reaped few rewards and struggled her entire career to make ends meet.

SKILLBUILDER

Developing Historical Perspective

1. Why might black musicians have been commercially less successful than white musicians in the 1950s? Explain.
2. What concerns of the current generation are reflected in today’s popular music?

SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R11.



▲ Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton is remembered as the first artist to record “Hound Dog.”

▶ Elvis Presley recorded “Hound Dog” in 1956—making it a popular hit.



THE RACIAL GAP African-American music had inspired the birth of rock 'n' roll, and many of the genre's greatest performers were—like Berry and Penniman—African Americans. In other musical genres, singers Nat “King” Cole and Lena Horne, singer and actor Harry Belafonte, and many others paved the way for minority representation in the entertainment fields. Musicians like Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonius Monk played a style of music characterized by the use of improvisation, called **jazz**. These artists entertained audiences of all races.

But throughout the 1950s, African-American shows were mostly broadcast on separate stations. By 1954, there were 250 radio stations nationwide aimed specifically at African-American listeners. African-American stations were part of radio's attempt to counter the mass popularity of television by targeting specific audiences. These stations also served advertisers who wanted to reach a large African-American audience. But it was the black listeners—who had fewer television sets than whites and did not find themselves reflected in mainstream programming—who appreciated the stations most. Thulani Davis, a poet, journalist, and playwright, expressed the feelings of one listener about African-American radio (or “race radio” as the character called it) in her novel *1959*.

A PERSONAL VOICE THULANI DAVIS

“Billie Holiday died and I turned twelve on the same hot July day. The saddest singing in the world was coming out of the radio, race radio that is, the radio of the race. The white stations were on the usual relentless rounds of Pat Boone, Teresa Brewer, and anybody else who couldn't sing but liked to cover songs that were once colored. . . . White radio was at least honest—they knew anybody in the South could tell Negro voices from white ones, and so they didn't play our stuff.”

—1959

At the end of the 1950s, African Americans were still largely segregated from the dominant culture. This ongoing segregation—and the racial tensions it fed—would become a powerful force for change in the turbulent 1960s.



▲ Innovative American jazz trumpeter and composer Miles Davis, shown during a recording session in 1959, continued to blaze musical trails throughout his career.

SECTION 3

ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- mass media
- beat movement
- rock 'n' roll
- jazz
- Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

MAIN IDEA

2. SUMMARIZING

Create a “Who's Who” chart of popular culture idols of the 1950s. Identify the art form and major achievements associated with each person.

Person	Art Form	Achievements

Why do you think they appealed to the young people of the 1950s?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. EVALUATING

Do you agree with Newton Minow's statement, on page 654, that TV was “a vast wasteland”? Support your answer with details from the text.

4. ANALYZING EFFECTS

How did radio, TV, and the movies contribute to the success of rock 'n' roll?

5. COMPARING AND CONTRASTING

In what ways were the rock 'n' roll musicians and the beat poets of the 1950s similar and different? Support your answer with details from the text. **Think About:**

- the values the musicians and poets believed in
- people's reactions to the musicians, poets, and writers