1. Early Rock and Roll
Some resources

History Books:

Anything by Robert Palmer, Peter Guralnick, Ellen Willis, Lester Bangs, Robert Christgau, Greil Marcus, etc.

Websites:
Allmusic.com
RobertChristgau.com
What is “Genre”?

Some questions to consider:

- Can a genre have an absolute definition?
- Are there grey areas?
- Changes with time
- What is the purpose of genre categories?
- Historical use of genre categories
Origins of Rock and Roll

• Hard to say exactly when Rock n Roll started
• Before the early 1950s, ”rock n roll” was not used to describe a specific kind of music
  – Rather, it was a euphemism for sex
• But music that sounds an awful lot like early rock n roll still existed, often under other names
  – R&B (Rhythm and Blues), Blues, Boogie-Woogie, Jump Blues, etc.
• Next we’ll look at a few artists who are not usually considered rock n roll per se, but who had a clear influence on early rock n roll
Origins of Rock and Roll (cont.)

Ex: Ike Turner’s Kings of Rhythm – “Rocket 88” (1951)

• Originally credited to “Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats” (Brenston was Ike Turner’s sax player and sang this song)
• Sun Records
• Often considered the first rock n roll record
• Distorted and prominent guitar
  – Semi-mythological story
Origins of Rock and Roll (cont.)

• Big Mama Thornton (b. Willie Mae Thornton)

Ex: Big Mama Thornton – “Hound Dog” (1952)

• Written by white songwriters
  Mike Lieber and Jerry Stoller
• Big hit for Elvis Presley, 1956

Other pre-rock and roll artists:

• Sister Rosetta Tharpe
• Louis Jordan
Origins of Rock and Roll (cont.)

- Big Joe Turner
  
  **Ex: Big Joe Turner – “Shake, Rattle and Roll” (1954)**
  
  - Strong backbeat
  - #1 R&B, no crossover
  - Bill Haley covered this song in the same year (#7 Pop)
    - Less suggestive lyrics
    - original has some thinly-veiled sexual lyrics
The “Golden Age” of Rock and Roll, roughly 1955-1960

Context for the emergence of rock and roll:
1. Rise of youth culture (a new demographic with money)
2. Independent radio (including black radio stations)
   – Played stuff other than mainstream pop, Country and Western, R&B
     • 3 industry-segregated styles
3. Independent record labels
   – Recorded music other than the three styles listed above
4. Transistor radios (replaces vacuum tubes)
   – Cheap, portable, smaller
5. Adults see rock and roll as “dangerous”
Significant events from 1955-1960

• “Rock Around the Clock” becomes a pop hit, and is associated with juvenile delinquency
• Independent radio (vs. large networks), and black stations, c. 1948
• Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Little Richard all have big crossover hits on indie labels
• Elvis signs to RCA, major label
• Payola hearings
Alan Freed

- Radio (Personality) DJ in Cleveland, Ohio
- 1951: one of the first to play R&B records for a white audience
- *Moondog’s Rock and Roll Party*
- Concert promoter
- 1954: NYC, national syndication
- Perhaps the first person to refer to R&B as Rock and Roll
  – Racial significance
“White music, Black music”

• Segregation in the US, especially in the South

• R&B, country, pop: Segregation of musical styles

• Widely assumed that white listeners listened to “white music” and that black listeners listened to “black music”

• Crossover hits in general (and Elvis in particular) dispelled this myth, and helped to break down musical segregation
Five styles of (Early) Rock and Roll

1. Northern Band Rock and Roll
2. New Orleans Dance Blues
3. Memphis Country Rock, aka Rockabilly
4. Chicago Rhythm and Blues
5. Vocal Group Rock and Roll

• Developed independently of one another, 1954-1956
• All five styles depended on contemporary African American dance music styles
1. Northern Band Rock and Roll

- “Whitening” of R&B
- Bill Haley and His Comets: one of the first successful white rock and roll acts
  Ex: Bill Haley and His Comets
  – “Rock Around the Clock” (1954/1955)
- Sexual stamina replaced with dancing: why?
- White interest in black R&B before this
  – Also popular in black markets, R&B charts
Rock and Roll and Juvenile Delinquency

- Fear and mistrust from older generation
- Hollywood representations of rock and roll as dangerous
- Clear associations between rock and roll and teen rebellion

Video Ex: Opening of *Blackboard Jungle* (1955)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyis76UeUsQ
2. New Orleans Dance Blues

- Piano and Sax-dominated R&B
- N.O. an important musical city: jazz and R&B

Fats Domino
- Warm, friendly image
- Less threatening for a white audience

Ex: Fats Domino – “Ain’t That a Shame” (1955)
- One of the first black early rockers to crossover to the mainstream
Music Charts and Crossover Hits

• In the 1950s, there were three main categories on *Billboard* and *Cashbox* music charts:
  – Rhythm and Blues (R&B)
  – Country and Western (C&W)
  – Pop

• Segregated by race and class
  – Original names of these categories: Race, Hillbilly, Pop (changed in 1949)

• In reality, people listened outside of these categories

• **Crossover**: when a song appears on more than one chart
Little Richard

- Crazy man, rock and roll persona
- Contrast with Domino
- Fewer crossover hits
  - Why?
- Thinly veiled sexuality

Ex: Little Richard – “Tutti Frutti” (1955)

- From nightclub act: “Tutti Frutti, Good Booty”
  - lyrics “cleaned up” for recorded version
- Lots of cover versions of his songs (more later)
Little Richard (cont.)

Ex: Little Richard – “Lucille” (1957)

• Whole band is playing in a rock n roll style
• No more shuffle beat

• Music: Loud, fast, aggressive
• Vocals: power over prettiness
  – Sound of his voice more important than lyrics
1950s Cover Phenomenon

• White covers of black hits
  – Usually a major label cover of indie label’s R&B hit
• With a few exceptions, the white versions sold better and charted higher
• Resentment from original, black artists, who often had no songwriting rights, so no money
• Note that cover versions had been common for decades
  – And outside of the “whites covering black songs” context too
Pat Boone

- “Rock and roll”
- Easy sell to a mainstream pop market
- Major star, well-known cover artist
- Brought a conservative respectability to the music’s image

Ex: Pat Boone – “Ain’t That a Shame” (1955)
- Compare with Fats Domino’s original version
3. Memphis Country Rock aka Rockabilly

- Basically a Southern, white version of 12 bar boogie blues
  - Looser rhythms, no saxophones
- Typical instrumentation:
  - Electric guitar
  - Acoustic guitar
  - Stand up bass
  - And from 1956, drums
    - still taboo in Nashville, making this music distinct from country

Ex: Elvis Presley – “Baby Let’s Play House” (1955)
Sam Phillips and Sun Records

- Indie DJ; studio owner; producer
- Memphis Recording Service, 1950
  - Field recordings
  - Vanity recordings
  - License recordings for other labels
- Sun Records opens c. 1952
- Initially focused on black blues and R&B
  - Knew that if he could find a white singer who could perform in an R&B style, he’d be rich
  - Why would Phillips think such an artist would be successful?
Elvis Presley

• Poor/working class family: more exposure to black culture than upper class whites
  – Why is that?
  – Grew up with pop, country, gospel, R&B, blues, etc.
    • And as an amateur singer, sang all these styles
• Summer 1953, vanity recording at Sun Records
• July 1954: Elvis gets a callback from Marion Keisker
• Session was country and pop, wasn’t going too well
• Towards the end, as things were winding down, Elvis starts playing an older R&B tune...
Ex: Arthur Crudup – “That’s Alright” (1946)
• Local R&B hit

Ex: Elvis Presley – “That’s All Right” (1954)
• Mixture of genres: country, R&B, pop
  – Unlike any style at the time
• Sounds normal to our ears, but was very unusual at the time
  – They weren’t sure anyone would want to hear it
  – This fusion had not been done before to this degree
• This song helped establish Sun nationally
“That’s All Right” (Elvis’ version)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country elements</th>
<th>R&amp;B elements</th>
<th>Pop elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternating bass</td>
<td>Walking bass and slap bass</td>
<td>Shortened form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acoustic guitar</td>
<td>Playful vocals</td>
<td>Mellow, crooning aspect to voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No drums</td>
<td>General rhythmic drive</td>
<td>Jazz-like electric guitar</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
• **Dewey Phillips** (no relation to Sam) – personality DJ in Memphis
  – Played “That’s All Right” on his radio show, and it took off
• Many listeners were fascinated because they couldn’t tell if Elvis was black or white
• Live on-air interview and race revelation

• **Racial/stylistic hybridity:**
  – Elvis’ Sun singles had an R&B song on one side and country song on the other
• Despite this, Elvis was marketed as “the hillbilly cat”
Elvis and RCA

• Near the end of 1955 Colonel Tom Parker became Elvis’ manager

• Negotiated a $40,000 deal with RCA
  – $35,000 to buy Elvis’ contract from Sam Phillips, and $5000 for Elvis
  – Why would Phillips sell Elvis’ contract?
    • Asked for an amount he thought was too much
    • Financial difficulties of running an independent record label

• This deal and multiple TV appearances made 1956 a breakout year for Elvis nationally

• Rock and roll became a major cultural force, and Elvis became a superstar
Two 1956 TV Appearances

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMmljYkdr-w

• Q: Why was TV such an effective medium for breaking a performer like Elvis?

• FCC complaints, obscenity

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-phwGzFLdGM
RCA and later recordings

• Elvis moved from being a regional star to an international star
• Almost as soon as he got to RCA, Elvis’ image began to be softened, and his material moved in a more pop direction
• What are the many pop elements we can hear in this recording:
• In later years, Elvis becomes a pop crooner like Bing Crosby or Frank Sinatra
• Separated from rock image of earlier years
• 1958-1960, Elvis is inducted into the Army
• Part of the end of the first wave of rock and roll (more later)
• In 1960, post-Army Elvis does not return to rock style and instead becomes a Las Vegas-style performer and movie star
• Elvis’ movies:
  https://www.imdb.com/list/ls059414601/

**Video Ex: Elvis Presley’s**
  “Comeback Special” (1968)
  “Heartbreak Hotel”
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rolb1dAbUAA
  “If I Can Dream”
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-pP_dCenJA