

Rock 'n' Roll, the British Invasion and periodising musical, social and cultural trends, 1954 -1964

1964 is often described as the start of 'The Sixties'. For example, James Curtis definitively splits the decade at that point.¹ This date is significant; it is the year Beatlemania signalled the start of the 'British Invasion'. That a musical phenomenon is used rather than a political or historical marker, such as the Vietnam War, speaks volumes about the impact the British Invasion is deemed to have had. Yet at the same time, the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 is seen as the start of a new era, a break from the concluding Eisenhower incumbency. This leaves 1960-63 in limbo, neither 'part' of the 1950s nor 'The Sixties'. This split would suggest that each of the three periods, 1954-1959, 1960-1963 and 1964 onwards exist as musically distinct from one another. Indeed, using the term 'Invasion' suggests a sudden, forceful takeover of an outside entity. Such phraseology is symptomatic of this compartmentalised view of 1950s and 1960s music. Such a broken narrative is unhelpful and misleading as a careful analysis of trends of the two decades will demonstrate. Just as The Beatles could not have existed without the rock 'n' roll of the 1950s, many of the trends that have come to exemplify the 1960s such as youthful rebellion, technological progress and racial politics originate in the 1950s in ways far more complex than simple antecedents. Many of the British artists of the 1960s consciously sought to emulate their predecessors and to recreate the experience of rock 'n' roll through their own interpretations. To understand the music of the 1960s, is vital that we investigate the music of the 1950s.

Rock n' roll arose from a complex combination of racial, demographic, generational and technological developments. It is impossible to separate these strands: racial issues, for example, had elements of gender and sexuality that were fundamental to attitudes of the time, as did generational issues that were linked back to racial perceptions but also existed within individual communities. Therefore, any discussion of rock 'n' roll in a limited space cannot do justice to the scope of its social impact. Nevertheless, by questioning the methodology of periodisation, we can chart developments that can stand alone in various areas of youth, race, gender and technology and the creation of identities through these. The desegregation of musical styles meant a desegregation of their audiences, who shared the experience rock n' roll offered in many different forms. Whether this was white teenagers listening to black performers on the radio, mixed race audiences dancing together to mixed race performers or artists such as Elvis Presley singing in racially ambiguous styles, rock n' roll had the power to bring together formerly

¹ James Curtis, *Rock Eras: Interpretations of Music & Society, 1954 – 1984*, (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1987), 112.

separate groups of people, all made possible by the demographic, generational and technological developments that made rock n' roll so distinctive from its predecessors. The huge growth in the number of teenagers with access to post-war affluence gave rock n' roll a previously unavailable market and the means to access it through the improving technology of radio and television. This in turn helped to create a distinctively 'teenage' identity, in which another aspect of rock n' roll, authenticity, was highly valued. These developments continued to be a part of subsequent musical developments until well beyond the British Invasion.

The reasons that rock 'n' roll tends to be split into 1954 – 1959, 1960 – 1963 and 1964 onwards are simple. The first, and most obvious, is that by 1959 the people who made the biggest musical impact and embodied rock 'n' roll were unable to influence popular music in the same way. Elvis had joined the army, Chuck Berry was having legal problems, Little Richard had joined the ministry, Jerry Lee Lewis was disgraced and Buddy Holly was dead. The second generation's brightest star, Eddie Cochran, died in 1960. Filling this void were the 'Majors', the biggest record companies who had been slow to appreciate rock 'n' roll's appeal and had lost much of the market to independent labels. Seeking to regain lost ground, and with no affection for the music, they released covers Garofalo terms 'schlock rock' that had the effect of putting 'a bland white middle-class face' on rock 'n' roll.² This was combined with an economic and social attack on means of production – the so-called 'payola' scandal – which discredited and restricted what could be performed. With the perception that the popular music scene was 'stagnating', unable to produce more than the vapid surf rock or conservative Motown brand, the British Invasion (raised on rock 'n' roll) is seen as overwhelmingly revolutionising popular music.³ This narrative is simplistic and unsatisfying, since it downplays surf rock's social implications and suggests that The Beatles and others came from nowhere whilst minimising folk and Motown. Popular music did not simply stop in 1960 – 1963.

To understand the period 1954 – 1964, we must first come to terms with the demographic shift that had occurred previously. The 'baby-boomer' generation was that born after 1945, and from then until 1964 76.5 million babies were born.⁴ This was repeated in Britain, though on a much smaller scale. Nevertheless, in both countries there were more young people than ever before. In America, this shift coincided with huge economic growth, providing this new group with an affluence never before seen. One figure has personal income increasing by 293% from

² Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the U.S.A. (4th Edition)* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 146.

³ Garofalo, *Rockin' Out*, 180

⁴ Richard Aquila, *That Old-Time Rock & Roll: A Chronicle of an era, 1954 – 63* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989) 17.

1940 to 1955.⁵ Moreover, thanks to increasing time spent in education, these people were being raised in youth-orientated environments in which their peers had a greater influence. Teenagers therefore represented a new section of society with their own tastes and purchasing power, yet still dependent on their parents. In Britain, which had suffered far more in the Second World War, that affluence took longer to obtain, but it is no coincidence that it arrived in the years immediately preceding the ‘Invasion’. In the 1950s, it was in America that this newly-conscious segment began to search for meaning in the world around them. Rock ‘n’ roll, with its hybrid influences, provided an alternative to the mainstream. It isn’t hard to see the appeal of rock ‘n’ roll to the youth of the 1950s when you compare it to what went before. Patti Page’s ‘How Much Is That Doggie In The Window?’ has been much maligned over the years due to the perceived banality of both the music and the lyrics. Released in 1953, and reaching a peak of #1, it is musically unadventurous and suffers from novelty dog barks and trite lyrics; the message of the song is that dogs make good company. For teenagers seeking meaning, such music provided little to relate to. Thus, when rock ‘n’ roll began to hit the airwaves, it provided on a basic level fun and excitement. Lyrically it could be much more incisive, extolling the virtues of youth and the music itself. Chuck Berry built his career around speaking to teenagers, thereby making rock ‘n’ roll the soundtrack for cars, relationships, music and young people finding their way in the world. If we take one of his songs, ‘School Days’ from 1957 and examine some of the lyrics, we see just how this happened:

Hail hail rock and roll
Deliver me from the days of old
Long live rock ‘n’ roll
The beat of the drum is loud and bold
Rock, rock, rock and roll
The feeling is there body and soul.⁶

There are three important points in just these lyrics. Berry declares his allegiance using the metaphor of rock ‘n’ roll as king, in the process turning it into a lifestyle choice; he is in effect submitting himself to it. In asking to be rescued from what went before, he refers to both music such as Patti Page’s and the parental generation, who are also represented by the school in the subject of the song. Such an explicit request underlines the strength of this new teenage identity and a feeling of being different and in some way restricted. By highlighting the rhythm, and linking it directly to ‘body and soul’, he emphasises the physicality that rock ‘n’ roll thrived on and that made it exciting whilst troubling the older generations. Each of the lines is interspersed

⁵ Glenn Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock ‘N’ Roll Changed America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9

⁶ Berry, Chuck, ‘School Days’, Chess 1653, (1957).

with guitar breaks that echo what has been sung, driving the tune. While of course this is only one song, it speaks of the very thing that made rock 'n' roll itself exciting.

Berry's description of rhythm also brings us to a further fundamental difference in terms of how the music sounded. Lyrics cannot speak to everyone all of the time, and many rock 'n' roll songs have only very basic lyrics. 'Hound Dog', originally performed by Big Mama Thornton, uses the metaphor of a misbehaving lover as a dog and tells how she won't stand for it any longer:

You made me feel so blue
Yeah you made me weep and moan
'Cos you ain't looking for a woman
All you lookin' is for a home
You ain't nothing but a hound dog
Been snoopin' round my door
You can wag your tail
But I ain't gonna feed you no more.⁷

This version of the song is very much a blues one, with a slower tempo than Presley's recording and a vocal delivery that exemplifies blues singing. The song had been through a number of significant changes by the time Presley recorded it, but his rock 'n' roll version has much simpler lyrics and is essentially the story of a bad purchase:

You ain't nothin' but a hound dog
Just cryin' all the time
You ain't a-nothin' but a hound dog
Cryin' all the time
Well you ain't never caught a rabbit and you ain't no friend of mine.
Well they said you was high class
Well that was just a lie
Yeah they said you was high class
Well that was just a lie
Well you ain't never caught a rabbit and you ain't no friend of mine.⁸

Despite being written by two white men, it had to be rewritten to appeal to a broader audience by Freddie Bell and the Bell Boys, whose version Elvis based his upon. Musically, his song is vastly different from either Big Mama Thornton's or Freddy and the Bell Boys'. It starts with Presley's gritty a capella vocals, followed by the music in which the drums are pushed to the front of the mix. The guitar remains subdued when playing rhythm, but comes to the fore for a solo. Occasionally the drummer plays some fills that are essentially just hitting the drum kit as hard as possible. The lyrics do not stray from the two simple verses, and they definitively remove any hint of sexuality that existed in the original recording. The effect is to underline the

⁷Thornton, Willie Mae, 'Hound Dog', Peacock Records 1612 (1953).

⁸Presley, Elvis 'Hound Dog', RCA 47-6604 (1956).

sound of Presley's voice and the rhythm together, whilst performances would reintroduce the controversial sexual themes implicitly through physical motions, based on the music. Experience is vital with this song; it is not meant to be examined, but to be heard and enjoyed. Sexuality was now unspoken, and had moved into the physical realm in such a way that people felt threatened. Encouraging people to dance to the beat was fundamental to the appeal of the music. Rhythm was the key to rock 'n' roll's success as music, and it was the most obvious break with the past. Nevertheless, it was the fact that it could span the experiential, with music such as 'Hound Dog' and the identifiable, with 'School Days', that helped to make it more than just a genre.

One of the perceptions of surf music, one of the major trends of 1960-63, is that it is shallow both musically and lyrically. Many singles were instrumentals, such as The Surfari's 'Wipe Out', which were mostly notable for making the guitar the sole focus of the song. Indeed, Ennis suggests that this is one of the few accomplishments of a 'fallow' period.⁹ Despite the Beach Boys' later artistic success, their first single was 1961's 'Surfin'' which was the first of four singles released by the band with a variation of 'surfing' in their titles up until 1963. Such repetition certainly suggests a dearth of substance, but if we consider the lyrics we can see that the song actually builds upon rock 'n' roll's themes:

Surfin' is the only life, the only way for me
Now surf
I got up this mornin', turned on my radio
I was checkin' out the surfin' scene to see if I would go
And when the DJ tells me that the surfin' is fine
That's when I know my baby and I will have a good time.¹⁰

The very start is a proclamation of a lifestyle, continuing the link between music and identity. Such a statement is arguably further than rock 'n' roll was prepared to go; it leaves no alternatives, essentially committing the narrator forever to a leisure activity, an actual declaration of delinquency that people associated with rock 'n' roll. The mention of radio is important too, because it is a symbol of affluence whilst also demonstrating the ability of technology to keep people in contact with their peer group. The radio allows the narrator to indulge in his hedonism. Furthermore, the narrator is taking his 'baby' along with him to the beach, which hints once more at the ties between youth, affluence and growing awareness of sexuality. The female presence may be minimal, and the song hints that she is merely going to watch and allow the narrator to enhance his masculinity, but nevertheless the fact that it is at the beach and therefore in swimsuits means that sexuality is inherent even here, despite being sublimated. Musically, the

⁹ Philip Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Music* (London: University Press of New England, 1992) 277.

¹⁰ Beach Boys, 'Surfin'', Candix 301 (1961).

song owes much to doo wop in that rhythm is generated by vocals and relies on harmonies to boost the sound. Whilst not groundbreaking, we can see that there is more substance here than Ennis gives surf music credit for.

Such qualities are found in British Invasion music too. ‘I Want To Hold Your Hand’ by the Beatles is often compared to their later, more artistic work as being more shallow and less important. Indeed, Ian MacDonald supports this, arguing that ‘the sound and feel of a record mattered more than what it literally said’ to The Beatles in 1964 – an updated reiteration of Elvis’ intention with ‘Hound Dog’.¹¹ However, if we look at the lyrics, they do not entirely support this assertion:

Oh yeah, I’ll tell you something
I think you’ll understand
Then I’ll say that something
I want to hold your hand.¹²

The key is the phrase ‘I’ll tell you something I think you’ll understand’. There are two possibilities as to the significance of these words. The first is that they were simply filler, with no ulterior motive other than to rhyme. This is unsatisfactory given that these were men who had spent a lot of time in the clubs of both Liverpool and Hamburg and it is not too much of a leap to suggest that the ‘something’ that the listener would ‘understand’ was more than simple hand-holding. When combined with The Beatles’ “antiauthoritarian sense of humour” that manifested itself in their image, we can see that these are not necessarily as innocent as they first appear.¹³ Musically, the song is based on a harmony vocal throughout and the prominence of the guitar as instrumentation, trends we have already seen in surf music. Excitement is generated through the increasing pitch of later lyrics, suggesting a gathering climax. This suggestive undertone was magnified by their appearances on TV, which despite simply the four Beatles remaining fairly still, delivered, in Bob Spitz’s words, a “sexual heat”.¹⁴ One of the songs performed was ‘I Want To Hold Your Hand’, and during their version of ‘Till There Was You’ subtitles with the names of the individual Beatles appeared. Acknowledging the sexual aspect of these four men, who were just playing instruments, the subtitles read ‘Sorry girls, he’s married’ when it came to naming John Lennon. Therefore, we can see that from the very start, The Beatles’ lyrics were never quite as simple as they appeared, even in their most basic form carrying with them

¹¹ Ian MacDonald, *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles’ records and the Sixties (Fully Updated Edition)* (London: Pimlico, 1998), 91.

¹² The Beatles, ‘I Want To Hold Your Hand’, Capitol 5112 (1964).

¹³ James Perone, *Mods, Rockers and the music of the British Invasion* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 76.

¹⁴ Bob Spitz, *The Beatles: The Biography*, (London: Aurum Press, 2005), 470.

meaning outside of the structure of the song. What this meant in practice was a rekindling of the implicit sexuality of the music of the 1950s that had been downplayed in the intervening years.

This sexuality was one of the biggest controversies of the 1950s rock 'n' roll scene. So important was it to the sound and impact that Watts goes as far saying that 'its appeal was founded on the straight proposal of sex from singer to the audience.'¹⁵ That is overstating the case: as we have seen, overtly sexual lyrics were often removed from cover songs, and what discussion of sex there is within songs is actually conservative, advocating traditional relationships and gender roles.¹⁶ Even 'I Want To Hold Your Hand', for all of its subtext, is more in this vein of writing than other Invasion acts such as the Rolling Stones, who covered Muddy Waters' 'I Just Want To Make Love To You' in 1964 and released 'Let's Spend The Night Together' in 1967. The Rolling Stones were always marketed on their flagrant sexuality, and by 1964, the forces that had managed to suppress this in earlier years were waning. What contributed to this decline was 'The Twist' by Chubby Checker in 1960, which reached number one in that year and then again in 1962. The song was a clarion call for people to dance together; that was its sole purpose. Whereas before rock 'n' roll dancing had involved vigorous movements between two partners, almost always male and female, 'the twist' as a dance could be performed by anyone, with anyone, without the sexual undertones holding someone implied. This appealed to those of the older generation, and adults could do it. Yet it was still physical, and required the relaxation and inhibition that previous rock 'n' roll dances had needed. 'The twist' was not so far removed from Presley's dance moves, but packaged in a very different way. The physicality of rock 'n' roll wasn't quite so bad after all, and indeed could be fun.¹⁷ Girls were no longer relying on men to lead their movements, which gave them freedom to choose on the dance floor.¹⁸ This physical change can be seen as a precursor to the feminism of the later 1960s. When this is taken in conjunction with social developments such as the contraceptive pill, which became available in 1960, we can see that attitudes to the combination of sex and music were changing. In this regard, the period 1960 – 1963 is critical to understanding the British Invasion.

A further theme is technology. While Bill Haley had tasted success with 'Shake, Rattle & Roll' in 1954 which sold over a million copies, it wasn't until 'Rock Around the Clock' was featured in 'Blackboard Jungle' that he obtained his first chart topper, doubling the sales figures

¹⁵ Michael Watts, 'The Call and Response of Popular Music: the impact of American pop music in Europe' in *Superculture: American Popular Culture and Europe*, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby (London: Elek, 1975), 129.

¹⁶ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 67 – 68.

¹⁷ Elijah Wald, *How The Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 216 – 217.

¹⁸ Wald, *How The Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll*, 222.

of its predecessor.¹⁹ The experience of rock 'n' roll came through in other ways, principally via radio and television. In this way, it relied on an older technology that was having a new lease of life (radio) and technology that had been previously unavailable to older forms of music (television). This shift was crucial in spreading rock 'n' roll's sound directly into the home. The growth of independent radio stations often gave rock 'n' roll artists exposure on a regional level they would otherwise have lacked if they had relied upon the 'majors', providing a stepping stone for national celebrity. Indeed, Elvis Presley would have remained a truck driver had it not been for Sam Phillips at Sun Records and Dewey Phillips, DJ at WHBQ radio in Memphis, Tennessee. The former gave him the opportunity to record, and the latter played in on local radio. This process repeated itself throughout the 1950s, notably again in Chicago with Chess Records releasing 'Maybellene' by Chuck Berry and Alan Freed playing it.²⁰ In Britain, radio was much more regulated. The BBC was the only domestic radio provider in the country, and in the 1950s saw itself as guardian of the nation's interests to the point where Dominic Sandbrook accuses the Corporation of 'moral didacticism'.²¹ Such a climate was of course unfavourable to music that was creating such a stir in the U.S.A., and teenagers were forced to turn to overseas commercial radio stations such as Radio Luxembourg if they wanted to hear rock 'n' roll on a regular basis. In his biography of The Beatles, Bob Spitz describes the enthusiasm of the young John Lennon, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr in wanting to listen to the nightly rock 'n' roll broadcast from overseas.²²

It may seem obvious, but television's power is visual, allowing physicality to steal the show. The most blatant example of this was Elvis' and his appearance on the Milton Berle show. Performing his version of 'Hound Dog', Presley's voice and movements left little doubt as to what he was suggesting the music could do. Using the microphone stand as a substitute for a female partner, Presley proceeded over two and a half minutes to gyrate and grind his way through the song. To hammer the point home, the band slowed down and he performed it again, this time repeating his actions with deliberate force. At 2:07 of the video used for this essay, Presley goes up onto the tips of his toes while bringing his hand to his crotch.²³ He does nothing more with his hand, but it is the ultimate statement of the physicality of his performance. The reaction to this is testament to the effect it had. On subsequent television appearances, Presley was either tamed by having to sing to an actual dog, or only filmed from the waist up. This did

¹⁹ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 33.

²⁰ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 63

²¹ Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles*, (London: Little, Brown, 2005), 355.

²² Spitz, *The Beatles: The Biography*, 34.

²³ Elvis Presley, 'The Milton Berle Show: Los Angeles: June 5, 1956,' Elvis Australia, http://www.elvispresleymusic.com.au/pictures/1956_june_5.html

little to reduce his popularity, and the audience reaction evident in the above video was repeated in his live performances to the point where ‘it was so out of control it was almost frightening’.²⁴ Such scenes were precursors to Beatlemania, and did much to fuel both rock ‘n’ roll’s popularity with the young and controversy with the adults. As we have seen, it was television that introduced Beatlemania to the U.S.A.

Terming the wave of British musicians an ‘Invasion’, however, is misleading; as Ennis points out, there had been a mutual contribution to popular music since at least 1700.²⁵ Therefore, to see the greatest element of continuity between rock ‘n’ roll, we must consider the U.S.A. and Britain as constituent parts of a larger Anglosphere, united by a common language and similar cultures. Charlie Gillett identifies five types of rock ‘n’ roll and their performers: Northern (Bill Haley), New Orleans (Fats Domino), Rockabilly (Elvis), Chicago (Chuck Berry) and vocal groups (The Chords).²⁶ Notably, three of these names are of places or areas, and a fourth, rockabilly, is closely associated with the American South. All can be termed rock ‘n’ roll yet remain identifiable with a place. This trend was continued with surf music, prominently Californian. Motown took its name from Detroit’s nickname, and closely associated itself with the city until moving to California. The famous ‘Motown sound’ was generated in Detroit, and it is no coincidence that Motown’s decline began after that relocation to Los Angeles. What gave the music its soul was this identification with an area; by having a geographic identity, it also had authenticity. In each of these cases, this was music that started off regionally but became nationally significant. Crucially, however, this music became popular in Britain as well. Much has been written about the lack of substance of British rock ‘n’ roll of the 1950s, and this was in part due to imitation of American styles. Just as someone from Detroit would have been unable to convincingly perform surf, British rock ‘n’ rollers lacked the American authenticity. The success of the Invasion was due largely to the end of this attempt to sound American and instead make the music sound British. The methods will be discussed below. Jim Curtis credits The Beatles with generalising a regional sound, and their versions of rock ‘n’ roll hits are certainly more than mere imitations.²⁷ Nor were they the only ones. In this sense, then, we can see the British Invasion as simply a continuation of English-speaking regions contributing their own sounds to a collective whole.

Both of these types of music were aimed at younger people. The performers themselves were, by and large, of the younger generation whilst being slightly older than their fans. Ringo

²⁴ Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), 124.

²⁵ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 280.

²⁶ Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City* (London: Souvenir, 1970), 30 – 43.

²⁷ Curtis, *Rock Eras*, 141 – 142.

Starr, oldest of the Beatles, was just 23 by the time of their first American appearance in 1964. Elvis was 21 when 'Hound Dog' was released. The notable exceptions to these were Chuck Berry, who was 29 when his first single was released in 1955, and Bill Haley, who was also 29 when 'Rock Around The Clock' was released in 1954. The reasons for the popularity of the latter two are numerous, but Berry's aforementioned ability to write lyrics that spoke to teenagers can account for his, whilst Haley's popularity was most likely based on being seen as one of the originators of the sound; his popularity began to decline soon after. This abundant youth, when combined with the sounds and lyrics examined above, aided in the development of a teenage identity based around rock 'n' roll. Rock 'n' roll was both a symptom of and catalyst for teenage identity because it provided its own iconography. The film 'Blackboard Jungle' was an important part of this process, indelibly linking rock 'n' roll with teenage rebellion and solidifying the genre in popular consciousness as music for the youth²⁸. The message was simple: rebels listened to rock 'n' roll. It was no longer just music, but a call to action that defined an identity. By choosing something new, exciting, and so controversial the younger generations were making a statement. Lipsitz, in discussing Latino influences in Los Angeles rock 'n' roll, argues that the music gave teenagers a means to emphasise their alienation from the older generations by identifying with the 'cholo' image of one of society's 'most despised groups'.²⁹ This can be applied on a wider scale than Lipsitz suggests, being relevant to teenage adoption of African American music as well. Rock 'n' roll thus becomes both a signifier of difference between generations and of unity between ethnicities through music. This found expression through various forms, notably fashion.

Clothing became a means by which young people could openly identify and declare allegiance to rock 'n' roll. Elvis took great care over his appearance, which took on greater meaning when combined with his wild moves and racially ambiguous sound. Indeed, so sartorially influential was he that Hatch and Millward credit him with defining how white rock 'n' roll should look.³⁰ Whilst Elvis was undeniably important, giving him such a large credit is somewhat misleading, given the influence of film stars such as James Dean in popularizing the leather jacket and jeans look for teenagers. Tellingly, The Beatles, who idolized Elvis, chose to copy the leather jacket approach when they played in Hamburg clubs rather than Presley's outfits. Nevertheless, by appearing different, Elvis solidified the link between fashion and musical taste. When The Beatles discarded their leather jackets and took to wearing suits and

²⁸ Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, 21.

²⁹ George Lipsitz, 'Land of a Thousand Dances: Youth, Minorities and the Rise of Rock and Roll' in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 272.

³⁰ David Hatch and Stephen Millward, *From Blues to Rock: An analytical history of pop music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) 77.

matching hairstyles, at their manager's insistence, they too were making a statement and gave the British Invasion a distinctive style. James Perone argues that some of the success of the British Invasion was based on a balanced aesthetic of old and new, between the 'rockers' of the 1950s and the emerging 'mods' (short for modern).³¹ Playing down the fashion of the 1950s whilst still playing its music bolstered this image of appreciation of the past whilst offering something new. Mod fashion was itself a product of affluence, based upon fine suits, that played upon the disregard for authority common to both the 1950s and 1960s youth by appropriating symbols and giving them new meanings; what Donnelly calls 'bricolage'.³² The Who's use of the Union Jack and RAF roundel thus became a subversive act, especially when combined with the smashing of their instruments. However, none of this was entirely new. The Mods of the 1960s were, in their fashion, seeking to achieve similar goals to those who identified with 'cholos' in Lipsitz's analysis.

Thus far we have seen elements of continuity in both the rock 'n' roll period of 1954 – 1959 and 1964. However, race is one theme that does not readily fit into this pattern. Racial mingling was part of the fabric of rock 'n' roll, though not as a determinedly political aim. This was characteristic of rock music, and the politicisation of black music would lead to soul and funk, distinct genres. Nevertheless, rock 'n' roll helped to usher in 'indifference, tolerance, and eventual acceptance', so that while the biggest battles were fought in the 1960s, the foundations had been laid.³³ Bill Haley's 1954 cover of Big Joe Turner's 'Shake, Rattle & Roll' was characteristic of this mingling, removing the most overtly sexual lines and replacing them with words more acceptable for the white mainstream. However, in doing so, Haley compensated by increasing the tempo and having band mates sing the chorus with him, emphasising the African-American aspects and turning the song into a rock 'n' roll party tune and beginning the rock 'n' roll era. Radio had a great advantage in that it removed the need to categorise by skin colour helping to break down musical segregation. For example, Dewey Phillips had to ask Elvis on air which school he had attended so his listeners knew that he was white, so racially ambiguous was his sound.³⁴ This exemplifies the extent of rock 'n' roll's hybrid nature.

However, cover songs began to dilute both lyrically and musically as rock 'n' roll progressed. For a society in which black sexuality was viewed with suspicion in large areas, especially when white people were involved, 'Tutti Frutti' by Little Richard was too much. Pat Boone's version turns the famous lyric into a simple sing-a-long, and the tempo is slowed down

³¹ Perone, *Mods, Rockers and the music of the British Invasion*, 81.

³² Mark Donnelly, *Sixties Britain* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2005) 37.

³³ Michael Bertrand, *Race, Rock and Elvis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 121.

³⁴ Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 101.

so that it is a shuffle rather than all-out dancing. Boone's diction and delivery are also much different, and the song becomes a love story. Little Richard had already had to clean up the lyrics from the crude words he sang in clubs, but Boone's cover deliberately removes any hint of sex or any sort of risk. The effect of covers such as these was to make rock 'n' roll a more mainstream music, pushing African Americans into copying this new, safer sound or back to the blues.

This relationship between 'whiteness' and blandness when it comes to rock 'n' roll seems to come to a peak between 1960 and 1963. Garofalo specifically highlights surf rock, with no mention of civil rights and its imagery of California and surfing which was predominantly white.³⁵ It is hard to dispute that surf music does not probe too deeply into social issues, instead painting pictures of endless fun. White music that did address these issues in any manner, whether directly or indirectly, fell into the folk genre, at this time almost totally separate from rock 'n' roll. While extremely important, folk was not music that inspired excitement in the same way rock 'n' roll had. We cannot ignore Motown either, despite not being rock 'n' roll in the classic sense. Berry Gordy's business had the effect of introducing into the mainstream 'girl groups' who gave black pop an air of sophistication far removed from rock 'n' roll. In doing so, they proved that black music could be both mainstream and economically successful. Motown played it safe however, remaining determinedly apolitical. It does share some common ground with the British Invasion: The Supremes released 'A Bit of Liverpool' in 1964 which contained covers of famous Invasion songs, while The Beatles covered multiple Motown songs in their first few albums.

This has helped to characterise the British Invasion as simply the return of American music.³⁶ This is not entirely true. Whilst it is true that the popular music scene in Britain had been dominated by American music since the end of World War Two, and many British musicians idolised African American performers, the British Invasion had important musical changes with racial implications. First of these was the sound of the music, which was much harder and grittier than much American music. This has been attributed to a variety of causes, including lack of access to decent instruments; the lower quality meant a dirtier sound.³⁷ This should not be overstated however, as quite often this sound was intentional. For example, when recording 'You Really Got Me', Ray Davies of The Kinks intentionally damaged his amplifier to create specific distortion, while The Who specifically made volume and distortion and destruction of instruments into part of their performance. Such actions made the British Invasion sound different to Fifties rock 'n' roll. This translates into their covers of rock 'n' roll classics.

³⁵ Garofalo, *Rockin' Out*, 158.

³⁶ Ennis, *The Seventh Stream*, 198.

³⁷ Perone, *Modes, Rockers and the music of the British Invasion*, 167 – 169.

Both The Beatles and The Kinks covered 'Long Tall Sally' by Little Richard, and both removed the piano, key to Richard's sound, which while dictated by the absence of a piano player in either band (at that time) had the effect of demonstrating influence whilst creating something new.³⁸ The fact that British musicians were overwhelmingly white also meant that this harder sound was primarily associated with white music. Wald especially criticises The Beatles for 'separating rock 'n' roll from its rhythmic and cultural roots' through their career by their preference for studio work and in the process segregating music into white rock and black soul.³⁹ This ignores the fact that the Civil Rights movement did not have the same momentum in the 1950s as it did in the 1960s. Black music reflected this growing political involvement, which was a very different motivation from that of white musicians, who did not face the same cultural struggle. As Guralnick says, soul's popularity was 'almost a mirror image of the social changes that were taking place'.⁴⁰ It is no coincidence that the Civil Rights Act was signed in 1964. We can therefore see why racial themes fit the periodisation of rock 'n' roll: in racial terms, 1964 was different to 1954 – 1963.

As we have seen, the 'British Invasion' is an unsatisfactory term. Rock 'n' roll was comprised of various forms that were distinctly American, but British involvement was not entirely unusual or entirely innovative. It was a culmination of trends that had developed from 1954 to 1963, rather than simply a resumption of the spirit of the Fifties. In generational, technological and sexual terms, the impact of the British Invasion was heavily reliant on the shift that occurred in the initial years of the Sixties. The conditions that brought it about were not in place before 1964. To periodise in such a way is to view the authenticity rock 'n' roll thrived on as purely racial, ignoring many of the other issues that concerned both those who enjoyed the music and those who opposed it. To do so is to view the 1950s through the lens of the 1960s, when racial politics was magnified to a greater degree. In fact, as Altschuler says, 'the Brits and their American fans understood that the 1960s began in the '50s'.⁴¹ This applies to its youthful emphasis, reliance on technology, sexual progress and the fact that there was no 'Invasion' at all. To divide music in such a way obscures what made it so potent in the first place.

³⁸ Perone, *Mobs, Rockers and the music of the British Invasion*, 102 – 103.

³⁹ Wald, *How The Beatles Destroyed Rock 'N' Roll*, 246 – 247.

⁴⁰ Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Sould Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom*, (London: Penguin, 1991) 2.

⁴¹ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 162.

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