Rock and Roll as a Cultural Phenomenon

The counterculture that arose in the 1960s was a youth-oriented movement that combined music, sexuality, and politics to challenge the mainstream cultural values that had long dominated American society, as well as the media that reflected those cultural values. The counterculture’s origins, though, were in the 1950s. Although the United States of the mid-twentieth century was a democracy politically, its media were dominated by a relatively small group of publishers, executives, and producers. These media bosses were interested in increasing their audiences and making more money, not challenging popular taste or social norms. Fearing political intrusion, official censorship, and boycotts led by champions of conservative morality, they generally “played it safe.” The film industry had its Production Code; publishers and news broadcasters practiced an accommodationist ethic, cooperating with rather than challenging government policy during World War II. Most disturbingly, all the media executives knuckled under to the Red Scare, demanding “loyalty oaths” from employees and blacklisting those who had communist pasts or who refused to cooperate with McCarthy era investigations into “communist subversion.”

Just as the McCarthy era was ending in the mid 1950s, a young man from rural Mississippi, raised in Memphis, Tennessee, in urban poverty, Elvis Presley, brought a new form of popular music, rock and roll, into national prominence. Rock and roll was fusion of country, gospel, and rhythm and blues music, none of which had much of a positive reputation in mainstream American society at the time. Country music was for “hicks” and “bumpkins,” and gospel and blues were labelled “race music.” Elvis was not the first rock and roll musician. Bill Haley and the Comets had a hit with “Rock around the Clock” in 1954. But when Elvis started selling millions of records and appearing on television in 1956, he had a force and energy singing and performing this music that no one could ignore.

Elvis was still a “hick,” of course, but he certainly did not look or act like one. He sang, danced, and dressed “black,” and this mixing of racial influences, combined with his charismatic effect on young women, “shook up” American society and the usual repressive forces went into action. Rock and roll was decried as leading to “juvenile delinquency” and “race mixing.” Ed Sullivan famously demanded that Elvis be filmed only from the waist up during one of Elvis’s appearances on his show (premiering “Don’t Be Cruel.”). Ultimately, rock and roll disc jockeys were subjected to a Congressional investigation for payola, or taking kickback payments to play records. Leading disc jockeys Alan Freed and Dick Clark (“American Bandstand”) were both charged with bribery. Clark survived the scandal, but Freed lost his job at WABC in New York, and was financially ruined by fines and legal costs. Elvis Presley was drafted and had to spend two of his best years (1958-1960) in the army; Chuck Berry, a leading black rock and roll artist, was jailed for two years for “white slavery”—in other words, openly keeping company with a white woman.

All of the preceding actions did have something of a chilling effect on the music between 1959 and 1963. White, clean-cut stars like Paul Anka, Bobby Darin, and Fabian, singing bleached–out versions of rock tunes, were promoted as “teen idols”; novelty songs like “Alley Oop” and “Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini” essentially made a joke of the rock and roll genre; and when Elvis returned from the army in 1960, his first television appearance was with Frank Sinatra, wearing a tuxedo. The threat from rock and roll seemed to have been blunted.
The Beatles

The forces of cultural repression were defeated by two events. One was the murder of President John F. Kennedy. Kennedy represented a new kind of President: a youthful, charismatic family man whom most people in the country came to admire and appreciate after decades of aged presidents dogged by ill-health. His gruesome murder in Dallas on November 22, 1963, under circumstances that are still not fully known or explained to this day, left a gaping wound in the national psyche made all the more traumatic by the fact that everyone had watched on television as his accused assassin was gunned down in the basement of the Dallas police department just one day before the President’s funeral was broadcast. Nothing less than a national psychological depression ensued, only to be lightened by the arrival of the Beatles on February 7, 1964, followed by their nationally televised appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show on February 9.

Rock and roll had been making something of a comeback in 1963, though. A bright young husband and wife songwriting team, Carole King and Gerry Goffin, started writing songs like “Take Good Care of My Baby” and “Up on the Roof” that another young musical talent, Phil Spector, had been turning into hit records with his “wall of sound” production techniques and “girl group” singers, led by his wife, Ronnie Spector. Across the Atlantic in England, the Beatles (John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrson, and Ringo Starr), after serving an apprenticeship in Germany, had started creating Elvis-like excitement with music inspired by Elvis and Chuck Berry, but driven by melodies of their own composition. By the end of 1963, the Beatles were the number one entertainers in England, had performed for and met the country’s royalty, and expanded their reputation to Scandinavia as well. As they took “Beatlemania” into France in January, 1964, they achieved their ultimate goal: their single, “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” was No. 1 on the US charts.

The Beatles’ invasion had been well-prepared. Capitol Records, the Beatles’ American label, plastered record shops with “The Beatles Are Coming!” stickers and flooded disc jockeys with preview pressings of “I Want to Hold Your Hand.” Ed Sullivan, after witnessing “Beatlemania” firsthand at the London airport during the fall, contacted the Beatles’ manager Brian Epstein and arranged for three performances by the group on his show during February, 1964. The plans worked to perfection. “I Want to Hold Your Hand” was infectiously catchy and joyful without being too raw or heavy, and the nation as a whole needed a shot of upbeat energy. Plus, the Beatles themselves proved to be quick-witted and poised when confronted by the press (quite a contrast to Elvis’s sullen confusion when interviewed). At the airport press conference after their raucous arrival in New York, George Harrison answered the inevitable, “when are you going to get a haircut?” question with “I got one yesterday!” And Ringo Starr chimed in, “He really did!” That simple show of goodwill broke the ice. The reporters laughed, and when they were asked why their music was so popular, John Lennon quipped, “if we knew that we’d form our own groups and be managers!” Mobs of teenagers showed up at the airport to greet them; more mobs awaited at their hotel. Every rock radio station in New York was playing Beatles music nonstop. Seventy-three million people tuned into the Ed Sullivan Show on February 9. By April, all five top songs on the Billboard Hot 100 were Beatles songs. Rock and roll was back to stay, and the real Sixties had begun.

The Evolution and Devolution of the Counterculture

The Beatles’ success opened the door for the so-called “British Invasion.” Suddenly, British artists and groups were all over the American airwaves, and some of them, like the Who and the Rolling Stones, were considerably rawer and more aggressive in their musical and performance
style than the Beatles. The Who often finished performance by completely destroying their instruments on stage. In contrast to the Beatles’ ironic and bemused response to audience mania, the Rolling Stones openly encouraged it (e.g. the TAMI Show film), and offered songs like “Let’s Spend the Night Together” that directly encouraged sexual promiscuity.

American rock and roll then found its own ways to push the limits. Folk music and rock were combined, first by Bob Dylan, the foremost poet of rock and roll, and then by the California group, the Byrds, who made Dylan’s rough-hewn, stinging lyrics more radio-friendly with beautiful harmonies and chiming guitars. Motown, an all-black record label from Detroit, led by stars like Marvin Gaye and the Supremes, successfully marketed black music to white audiences. Rock and roll gradually conquered most independent AM stations, and by the end of the 1960s found a new outlet in FM, where AOR, or “album oriented rock” stations played the longer and more ambitious rock music that refused to be constrained by the limits of the three-minute single 45 rpm record. “Inna-Gadda Da Vida,” an improvisational, 17-minute 33 rpm album side by the group Iron Butterfly was the first great AOR hit. (And yes, it’s the source of the “In the Garden of Eden” hymn parody everyone knows from The Simpsons. Homer to Marge: “Honey, don’t you remember making out to this hymn?”)

Lyndon Johnson, Kennedy’s successor, escalated the War in Vietnam in 1965, and anti-war sentiment did not take long to surface. The Vietnam War was covered every night on television, and over the next few years, casualties (tallied almost every night on TV news shows) continued to grow without any evidence that the Communist insurgency in Vietnam had been defeated. College and university campuses became hotbeds of war protest, as more young men feared that the draft would send them into the war’s meatgrinder. Their parents, who had sacrificed much to win World War II, were understandably flabbergasted that their children would be so unpatriotic. The so-called Generation Gap was born. What President Richard Nixon would call “the Silent Majority” was on one side, and the youth-oriented counterculture was on the other. Young people abandoned their families and flocked to urban neighborhoods like Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco, where they formed hippie communes based on “free love” and “alternative lifestyles,” which their elders called “sexual license” and “drug abuse.”

Into this combustible mix of rock and roll music and protest, one major spark was thrown—experimentation with “mind expanding” drugs. Dr. Timothy Leary, a professor of psychology at Harvard University, who had been experimenting with LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), a powerful hallucinogenic drug, started taking it himself, and became convinced that its wide use could induce enough visions of peace and love to mitigate hostility and conflict in the world. His slogan of “Turn on, tune in, and drop out” became a catchword for disillusioned, war-protesting, rock-listening youth who yearned for a better world and sought it through the psychedelic experience. Over the next few years, millions of people, including the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, would take this drug and have their lives changed. Rock and roll inspired by LSD came to be known as “acid rock.” Music referring to and inspired by LSD “sold” the drug world-wide, and the hallucinatory state it induced was so radically different from mainstream reality that the gulf of the Generation Gap widened too far to be bridged. Marijuana, a milder but still psychologically disorienting drug, also made its way out of urban jazz clubs and black neighborhoods into the counterculture as well.

The combination of music, protest, and drugs reached a culmination with the great “rock festivals” of the late 60s and early 70s. The most famous was Woodstock, in August of 1969, when over 400,000 young people showed up for an outdoor, three-day, all-star rock concert planned for
less than 100,000. Despite anarchic organization, food shortages, and almost universal drug use, Woodstock proved a good time for all, and the documentary movie of the event turned out to be an enormous box-office success. The same could not be said for another large rock festival the next month at Altamont Racetrack, outside San Francisco, when an equally large crowd showed up for a free concert that would feature the Rolling Stones. The group’s deliberate cultivation of an outlaw image and audience mania finally caught up with them when they engaged the notorious motorcycle gang, the Hell’s Angels, to provide “security.” One of the Hell’s Angels stabbed a concert-goer to death in front of the stage where Mick Jagger, the Rolling Stones’ lead singer, was performing.

From that point on, the idealism and the cohesion of the counterculture began to dissipate. There would be a few more big festivals, and the Vietnam War would grind down to a painful end, but the ensuing 1970s brought addictive and life-destroying drugs like heroin and cocaine into the counterculture. Major rock stars like Jimi Hendrix, the foremost psychedelic guitarist, Gram Parsons, the inventor of country rock, and Janis Joplin, the most talented white female blues singer, all died of drug overdoses. The end of sexual repression spawned movements like Women’s Liberation and Gay Pride, but it also introduced a sexual license that in the mid to late 1970s directly contributed to the AIDS epidemic which started in the 1980s. Even the colorful, secondhand hippie fashions of the sixties turned into garish, polyester “leisure suits.”

The impact of the counterculture was enhanced and magnified by the media. War protests themselves could not make the Vietnam War generally unpopular. Honest television news coverage and documentaries presented its horror and futility better than any demonstration. Plus, the infusion of rock and roll into all the major media—radio, television, print, and the movies—also amplified youthful protest and expanded it far beyond just opposition to the war. The music created a soundtrack for a new lifestyle that emphasized adventure and skepticism toward mainstream moral values.

During 1973, intrepid newspaper reporters for the Washington Post pursued the high-level cover-up of the Watergate break-in scandal; the Supreme Court subsequently forced President Richard Nixon to release White House tapes that confirmed his intention of bribing dangerous witnesses to his plans to spy illegally on his political opponents. In 1974, President Nixon had to resign in the wake of the Watergate scandal, and political cynicism on both sides of the Generation Gap set in. The counterculture itself certainly ebbed, but it has never really gone away, and the controversies that it left in its wake still haunt us today.