

America in the 1950s

## Setting the Stage



## A Post-War Era

- Politics in the 50s
  - 1952: Eisenhower elected President
  - Sen. Joe McCarthy and the HUAC chased Communists
- Civil Rights
  - The Great Migration
  - 1954: Brown vs Board of Education
- Entertainment
  - TV hit the mainstream of American households
  - James Dean & Brando played rebellious teens in film

## The Music Industry

- The Major Labels dominated the industry
  - Mostly Pop, Jazz and Classical
  - Targeted at White middle-class adults
- The 45 rpm record
  - Usually a single and a “b-side”
- The Fender Esquire
- AM Radio



## R&B Finds a New Audience

- 1950s White teens began listening to R&B
  - ▣ Music was creative, exciting, a little taboo
  - ▣ Played after hours by Indie DJs
    - Doo Wop, Electric Blues, Jump
- **DJ Alan Freed**
  - ▣ Created shows targeting these teens
    - Radio, movies and concerts
  - ▣ Popularized the term “Rock ‘n Roll”

Alan Freed



The music of Black America in the 40s and 50s

## Rhythm & Blues



## Mainstream Blues

- Boogie Woogie
  - Upbeat piano blues with playful lyrics
- Jump Blues
  - Boogie Woogie with “little big bands”
  - Most imitated R&B style of the 40s
- The Stars:
  - **Louis Jordan**
    - “Caldonia”, “Beans & Cornbread”
  - **“Big” Joe Turner**
    - “Shake, Rattle ‘n Roll”, “Flip, Flop, Fly”



"Big" Joe Turner



Louis Jordan

## Doo Wop

- Teen acapella groups singing nonsense scat vocals
- Often **1-Hit Wonders**
- Exploited by producers
- The Stars:
  - **The Penguins**
    - “Earth Angel”
  - **The Chords**
    - “Sh’boom”
  - **Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers**
    - “Why Do Fools Fall In Love”



Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers

## R&B Crossover

- R&B stars who broke the 50s “color wall”
- The Stars:
  - **Fats Domino**
    - “Blueberry Hill”, “Ain’t That a Shame”
  - **Ray Charles**
    - The father of **Soul** – R&B mixed with Gospel
    - “I Got a Woman”, “Georgia on My Mind”
  - **Little Richard**
    - Sexually controversial **Glam Rock** pianist
    - “Tutti Fruity”, “Long Tall Sally”
  - **Chuck Berry**
    - Chess Records guitar hero and “poet laureate” of 50s R&B
    - “Maybelline”, “Johnny Be Good”

## Cover Songs

- “Sanitized” remakes of R&B tunes
- Motivations?
  - \$\$\$...of course
  - More \$ for the copyright holder
    - Usually the label, not the songwriter
  - White artists exploited the “color wall”
- **Pat Boone**
  - The king of 50s covers...called it “bleaching”
  - Mostly Little Richard, Fats Domino



Pat Boone

50's White musicians fuse Country with R&B

## Rockabilly



## Rockabilly

- The 1<sup>st</sup> Rock style played by White musicians
  - ▣ Combined R&B, Country, Western and Pop
- **Bill Haley**
  - ▣ 1<sup>st</sup> Rockabilly performer
  - ▣ "Rock Around the Clock" (1954)
  - ▣ Lots of covers
    - "Rocket 88"
    - "Shake, Rattle 'n Roll"
  - ▣ Concerts often became riots



## Sun Records

- Memphis, TN indie label
- 1952: Founded by **Sam Phillips**
  - ▣ 1951: Ike Turner's "Rocket 88" was his 1<sup>st</sup> produced hit
- Pioneered **Slapback Echo** – a rapid delay
- Artists
  - ▣ Elvis Presley
  - ▣ Jerry Lee Lewis
  - ▣ Carl Perkins
  - ▣ Roy Orbison
  - ▣ Johnny Cash



The King of Rock 'n Roll

Elvis Presley



## Elvis Presley

- Most imitated early Rock star
- Proved commercial viability of Rock
- Ushered in an era of massive cultural change
- A Career in 4 Phases
  - 1954: Early years at **Sun Records**
  - 1955 - 1958: **RCA** pop icon
  - 1958 - 1968: **MGM** Movie star
  - 1968 - 1975: Las Vegas celebrity, media icon

## Elvis Presley: Sun Records

- 1935: Born in Tupelo, MS
  - Southern roots, values
- 1948: Moved to Memphis, TN
- 1954: Records at **Sun Records**
  - A song for his mother...Sam saw his potential
  - “That’s Alright (Mama)” recorded “just messing around”
    - Country session players Scotty Moore (g) and Bill Black (b)
    - Huge local hit – 20,000 copies sold!



## Elvis Presley: RCA Pop Icon

- 1955: Col. Tom Parker
  - ▣ Elvis' new manager
    - TV & movie connections
    - Merchandising
- Moved him to **RCA Records**
  - ▣ Marketed as a crooner
    - "Don't Be Cruel", "Heartbreak Hotel"
  - ▣ 1956: Major TV spots on Steve Allen and Ed Sullivan
  - ▣ RCA's investment proved Rock's commercial potential



## Elvis Presley: MGM Movie Star

- 1958 – 1960: Drafted into the Korean Conflict
  - ▣ Showed his patriotism, polished his image
- 1958 – 1968: MGM film career
  - ▣ 31 total films
  - ▣ Summer blockbusters
    - B-movie plots
  - ▣ Only recorded soundtracks
    - "Jailhouse Rock", "Trouble"



## Elvis Presley: Later Years

- 1968: NBC TV special *Elvis*
  - ▣ Restarts his performing career
  - ▣ 1145 concerts from then to 1977
- Las Vegas casino shows
  - ▣ Elvis impersonators rejoice!
  - ▣ An era of jumpsuits, karate and theatrics
- 1973: Health in noticeable decline
  - ▣ Prescription drug abuse, divorce, seclusion
- Aug. 16<sup>th</sup> 1977: Died of heart failure in Graceland



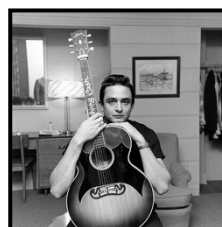
Sun artists and freelancers

## The Rest of Rockabilly



## Sun Records Hall of Fame

- **Carl Perkins**
  - 1st to hold Top 10 in Country, R&B & Pop
  - “Blue Suede Shoes”, “Matchbox”
- **Jerry Lee Lewis**
  - “The Killer”, wild and rebellious pianist
  - “Whole Lotta Shakin’”, “Great Balls of Fire”
- **Johnny Cash**
  - “The Man in Black”, bad-boy Country Icon
  - *At Folsom Prison, Cash I to V*
  - “Folsom Prison Blues”, “Hurt”, “Ring of Fire”



## Other Rockabilly Greats

- **Roy Orbison**
  - Sweet-voiced, bespectacled genius
  - “Only the Lonely”, “Pretty Woman”
- **Buddy Holly**
  - Nerd-rock icon, prolific songwriter
  - Died in a plane crash in 1959
  - “Peggy Sue”, “That’ll Be the Day”
- **The Everly Brothers**
  - Teen idols, singing in close harmony
  - “Bye Bye Love”, “Wake Up Little Suzie”

