

The African American Legacy on Rock and Roll

Brittany Dreyer

From the beginning of the twentieth century African American music, or “race” music, as it was called in the early half of the century, became a leading influence in the upbeat, energetic and soulful style that would later become known as Rock and Roll. In particular, it can be argued that the Blues style of the Deep South played an integral role in shaping this new revolutionary genre. Without the influence of African American music the genre of Rock and Roll would be intrinsically different in the aspects of its namesake, style, and overwhelming popularity. This paper will look more specifically at Blues music, Country and Western, and the foundation of Rock and Roll itself, in order to make clearer the contributions that other genres made to the rise of Rock and Roll.

The Blues was a musical style that was created during the turn of the twentieth century in the American South. It spread throughout the rest of the country considerably fast due to the popularity of the phonograph and the fact that it was sung near railroad stations where many heard it. By the 1920's, the emotional and down-to-earth music had become incredibly popular with the African American audience, so much so that recording companies sent teams south to make field recordings which featured many different types of artists. For instance, from the Mississippi Delta region a subgenre was created called the Delta Blues. The first Delta Blues recordings were by Charley Patton, who recorded for Gennett Records in Richmond, Indiana and eventually recorded fourteen songs that would shape this new subgenre. Another singer famous for the unique Delta Blues sound was Robert Johnson. He made forty-two known recordings that influenced many modern artists, such as Eric Clapton. The later release of his recordings in the

early sixties would influence the Blues revival of the 1960's and became a major influence on the development of Blues-Rock in England.¹ Another prominent subgenre of the Blues was the Jump Blues. Artist Louis Jordan was famous for this energetic style that combined elements of Jazz, Blues, Swing, and up-tempo Boogie-Woogie music. In particular, he used Swing rhythm, Blues harmonic patterns, and Vaudeville-influenced lyrics which proved to be significantly popular.² With his band, the Tympany Five, he topped the Rhythm and Blues Charts with numerous hit songs. Although much of this music was marketed to and consumed by African Americans, more and more people were leaving the south to move to northern cities, causing an extensive demographic shift that would later influence the musical interests of many young people from different social classes and races, and also develop even more subgenres, such as Motown in the 1960's. Much of the music of the Rock and Roll era that would follow was the same type of music, but simply marketed at a different demographic. But even as Rock and Roll expanded into the 1960's the influence of American Blues was still heavily prominent and celebrated throughout the world.

Another influence of Rock and Roll was Country and Western music, or "Hillbilly" music, as it was earlier called. Many distinctly County and Western singers were inducted into the Rock and Roll hall of fame for their contributions in shaping the new genre. One such singer was Hank Williams. At a young age, Hank was taught the Blues by a young African American friend, Rufus Tee-Tot Payne. Although he was rejected from the Grand Ole Opry in 1946, they would later request for him to play for them after his first years of success. Just as Hank seemed to be sympathetic to the plight of African Americans – in particular segregation and the many Jim Crow laws of the time – he also hated the term "Hillbilly" music as a term to describe the

¹ David Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 45.

² *Ibid.*, 52.

country style he played, claiming it dehumanized the music and the fans. This shows an important connection between the disrespectful attitude white society had towards African American music, as well as the disrespect of the similar country music performed by white men in the South. Specifically, his popular song, “Hey Good Lookin’” has an energetic and upbeat sound that can be found in the early Rock and Roll hits later in the decade, such as “Rocket 88” by Bill Haley and the Saddlemen. A new type of Country infused Rock and Roll would later become the subgenre of Rockabilly, which Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and Ricky Nelson were famous for.

These two genres shared another aspect that would embody the new Rock and Roll era and become popular to the present day. In the first half of the twentieth century, the guitar was found in the popular music of the South, including Blues and Hillbilly music. During the Medieval period, stringed instruments were said to be associated with the devil, and in the modern era, they became associated with the marginalized people in the American South, such as sailors, railway workers, the homeless or poor Southerners.³ The electric guitar was developed shortly after World War II and soon became the symbol of the energetic new style that was making its way into the popular music of the time. As with the genre, the guitar seemed to have an element of danger and excitement, which fascinated fans further. The evolution of the “frying pan” guitars of the 1920’s, to the solid-body electric guitar, symbolizes the rise of Rock and Roll from the marginalized American South that housed both Blues and Hillbilly music.

In the early rise of Rock and Roll, promoters of the genre, such as Alan Freed, tried to use the influence of African American Blues music as a type of promotion, but also a type of contradiction. A quotation that accurately describes this phenomenon is: “When it suited their

³ Joseph Schloss, Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *Rock: Music, Culture, and Business* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 54-55.

purposes, they made every effort to exploit the music's connections to African American culture. But in situations where they felt it worked against them, they tried to disassociate the genre from African American culture as much as possible."⁴ Another aspect that made Rock and Roll so potent was the numerous cover versions of African American songs. Commonly, these songs would sound similar, but the white artist would market as Rock and Roll, while the black artist market as Rhythm and Blues. Thus, the term Rock and Roll became a means to differentiate between the two genres in the eyes of the consumers. Even the first generation of Rock and Roll artists, including Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Fats Domino, still saw themselves as Rhythm and Blues artists when Rock and Roll first took hold. These artists also continued to acknowledge the African American style they were simultaneously known for. Therefore, in the beginning of the 1950's, there was not a definite change between the African American Blues that was directed to a specifically African American audience, and the new Rock and Roll sound that soon dominated the charts.

To answer the question of the extent that African American influence had on the later Rock and Roll genre, it seems to be an integral part of the foundation of the genre and the artists that are included in it. All the artists discussed previously were impacted by the African American Rhythm and Blues style in one way or another. For instance, the success of the African American Blues genre prompted recording companies to cover many songs originally performed by African Americans and market them to the young white audience of the 1950's. This is shown over and over again in the examples of Elvis Presley and Pat Boone, two young handsome white singers who took distinctly Blues songs and transformed them to be consumed by the white teenagers who so enthusiastically applauded this new movement. It can thus be argued that the name, Rock and Roll, was created for the purpose of marketing Blues music to a different kind

⁴ Schloss, Starr and Waterman, *Rock*, 32.

of audience with a different identity.⁵ The new, younger artists of the time, who were marketed mainly for the young Baby Boomer generation, claimed to have been influenced greatly by their Rhythm and Blues predecessors, but in contrast, they still claimed to be distinctly Rock and Roll singers. Specifically, Elvis Presley's "Hound Dog" is a cover of the original, performed by the African American artist Big Mama Thornton.⁶ But since Big Mama Thornton's version is more explicit and sexual Elvis excluded these innuendos in an attempt to aim the song at the younger conservative audience. Before Elvis became famous, it was said that his voice had confused audiences since they did not know if he was white or black. Ultimately, he had been one of the most successful artists to create music that was so deeply rooted in the African American style.⁷ These covers would have great success in this time period, and would cause them to be recognized by a larger, more youthful audience.

As Rock and Roll expanded its audience in the 1960's, Motown and the music of British Invasion resonated greatly throughout America. Motown was a type of soul music specifically influenced by African American Blues and Jazz. As most of the music was performed by African American singers, it was successful in crossing the racial divide at the time, and still does so today. The British Invasion was a revolutionary rock movement that reinstated the era of Rock and Roll into the mainstream. Many young British people had also been influenced by the American Rock and Roll of the 1950's, and made their own bands with a distinct sound that gained significant fame in America. For instance, one British Invasion band, The Animals, has a sound that is deeply rooted in Rhythm and Blues. Specifically, the singer, Eric Burdon, emphasized the influence of African American Blues artists on his own style of music. While

⁵ Schloss, Starr and Waterman, *Rock*, 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁷ Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 110-111.

discussing one of his Blues heroes, vocalist and songwriter, Bo Diddley, Burdon states, “Bo’s one of the guys who invented rock ‘n’ roll. He took two cultures that existed in separate forms – country and western and the kind of blues that used to be known as ‘race music’ – and put them together.”⁸ Burdon thus reinforces the idea that Rock and Roll was invented using two different music forms that had previously existed separately of each other. This shows the strong influence of African American Blues on the many music forms to follow, especially Rock and Roll. Many other British Invasion artists were also heavily influenced by the American genres of the Deep South and the Rock and Roll era that bridged the divide between the many demographics and cultures in America at the time.

The Rock and Roll movement of the 1950’s was a tidal wave that spread across the world in a mere few years, and is still making ripples in the music industry to this day. Through an examination of Blues music, Country and Western, the foundation of Rock and Roll and the legacy it inspired is shown to have been inspired by these separate genres. Although many people remember Rock and Roll as a new and exciting entity that had never been heard of before the 1950’s, it had been years in the making through the separate genres of Country and Western and African American Blues. Without the influence of African American music of the early twentieth century, the genre of Rock and Roll would certainly not exist in the way it does today. As Rock and Roll is a mix of many styles of music, it relied on these genres to make it into what is today, and as such it owes a considerable debt to African American music and artists.

⁸ Eric Burdon Biography, IMDb, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0121007/bio> (accessed February 9, 2014).

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