

# The birth of rock n' roll – a case of racial conflict

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THE BIRTH OF ROCK n' ROLL – A CASE OF RACIAL CONFLICT The term rock 'n' roll has been traced back as far as the 1920s in black music, but it became an accepted when disc jockey Alan Freed began used it to describe the character of the rhythm and blues he played on his radio program in the mid-' 50s. The term " Rockin' and Rollin" were originally used as slang for sex, in black pop music. However, it went on to become the name for a new, salacious musical genre.

Innovation in audio technology, new instruments, fresh talent, business savvy record producers, and a young population of new consumers created by post-war economic prosperity helped turn " race music" into " rock and roll". The roots of Rock & Roll can be traced back to rhythm and blues and country rock.

We must note the political context of the rock n' roll movement before delving deeper into the recesses of the genre.

Black people were beginning to identify and assert themselves racially supported by a series of Supreme Court judgments in favour of integration and the Black community in general Rock n' roll became a symbol of Black empowerment to the Whites, especially to the segregationists who were accustomed to and valued a separation of the races, but were now legally forced to operate against those segregationist values. The resistance to rock n' roll music, highly enjoyed by young White kids, was a culmination of all the hostility and tension of the Civil Rights movement.

There was a certain White resistance to such music in the form of The Ku Klux Klan and other White-supremacist organizations that openly preached the exaggerated consequences of listening to rock n' roll music.

The term “jungle music” was used to describe the rock n' roll beat, declaring it would cause the White youth to lose their sense of humanity and dignity while mixing races. This kind of resistance to the rock n' roll movement often came to physical assaults on Black performers. There have been reports of assaults such as the one on Nat King Cole, arguably one of the most docile African American performers of the time.

While performing at a Whites-only venue, a mob rushed the stage and beat him. Nat King Cole not only suffered the bruising from the White audience who ambushed him, but also a tongue lashing from Black activists who reprimanded him for not demanding integrated venues. The conflicts of rock n' roll music are direct reflections of both the institutional resistances of Whites to integration and the widespread exploitations of Blacks across the country in many industries.

The post-war economic boom ushered in a new era in radio broadcasting.

With greater competition, national radio networks gave way to a horde of new independent, locally based stations hosting a variety of entertainment programs. White radio producers would hide Black performers from White audiences. They would often choose a tune with potential from a Black artist, and have a White singer perform the song without the provocative dancing or emotive moaning of the original version. This proved to be a multiple win for the Whites as the Black artist would be kept away from the spotlight, the

White producer was making the money, and White kids were idolizing the White singer.

It is widely believed that iconic artists like Pat Boone, Elvis and Georgia Gibbs began by assisting in the exploitation of Black artists who were replaced by more-polished, White impersonators. Many observers suggest that rock n' roll would never have been so controversial had it not been for the sexual revolutions and conflicts going on throughout the mid 1900s. The rock n' roll revolution coincided with the institutional revolution of acknowledging youth sex. Rock n' roll music often ended up portraying sex as a new, fun activity, something that normally happens when young people fall in love.

The older generations were quite averse to such music and used many tactics to resist the trend. Magazine campaigning became very popular among the older generations; parental guides and “ girl talks” were printed to show that people still valued pre-marital abstinence.

The situation eventually escalated into full censorship, until disc jockeys and music hall owners refused to play Black records in general. There were petitions and requests for radio stations to not play sexually-explicit lyrics, but the response was relatively weak. The truth is that the White artists, who impersonated the Blacks, saved the movement.

They cleaned up the sound and look of rock n' roll, until White parents would accept it. Parents did not want their sons and daughters listening to wild rocker Little Richard Penniman, but would let them listen to Pat Boone.

Soon, White faces like Elvis Presley and Jerry Lewis were reintroducing the sexuality of rock n' roll music and launched it into mainstream legend. Black

popular music—everything from jazz and blues to boogie-woogie and rhythm and blues—stood at odds to the white pop songs and artists that epitomized post-world war conservatism. By comparison, rock n' roll was raunchy, unrestrained, rowdy, and even evolutionary. That which was categorized by the record industry as “race music” stood as a powerful cultural alternative to the tight-lipped, conformist values. Black Rock n' Roll music also reflected major social and cultural changes brought on by post war urbanization, including youthful rebellion.

By contrast, white pop music had ignored or watered down these transformations. American youth, inspired by nonconformist icons like James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Natalie Wood, naturally gravitated toward the more edgy black tunes which they felt spoke of their frustrations.

These young whites made black music their own by learning the dances, memorizing the slang, and copying the cool swagger of African-American boogie-woogie and rhythm and blues artists. They claimed as their own a genre scorned by most whites born before World War II. Thus, Rock n' Roll was indeed reflective of the Civil Rights movement.

It stirred up a whole generation and shows that a culture conflict usually always has a deeper context to be found.