

## Three 1950s Genres

### **Rock n' Roll**

Rock n' Roll started in the south. It began more or less with the Saturday Night Jamboree, with Sun Records artists like Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins and Jimi Hendrix getting together and having jam sessions backstage. White Rock n' roll music was a fusion of blues and country. It is simple with the instruments, for example the drums are very straight forward, not many fills, use of slapped bass, but also gradually using electrical instruments, for example the electric guitar that Chuck Berry used as a main instrument. He was the first one to do that.

<sup>1</sup> *“With teen culture came also teen disaffection, teen rebellion, and occasionally teen violence. There wasn't really much of that with Rock 'n' Roll, but the music attracted plenty of disapproval for its sexuality and its noise.”*

Before the 50s the term teenager was not used. You went from being a child to a grown up with no in between. Rock n' roll changed that. Suddenly there was a distinction between what kind of music parents and their kids were listening to. Rock n' roll attracted a teenage crowd. It was raw, rhythmic and loud, and many older people did not approve of its sexuality and noise. With this music came also a change in the relations between black and whites. In 1955 Alan Freed's radio program “Rock n' roll Ball” draws a huge white audience. And even though white teenagers could not get into black clubs and vice versa, black artists, black music got onto television and white teenagers could see them. With this result the independent labels (mostly black people) boomed with an increase in income from 22% to 56% in the late 50s. The four major labels had a decrease from 78% to 44%. The music market

---

<sup>1</sup>Pop Music, The Text Book, Page 22

doubled from 1955 to late 50s and the rock n' roll share of that was almost half. This shows us that clearly something big was happening within the music genre and society as well. Black and white music fusion was going on in the south, finally there was a time for young people to enjoy their youth and be rebellious. With this rebellious mind, I believe that there was a new generation growing up that was allowed to ask questions about things as civil rights, women's rights and dared to show dissatisfaction and speak up about it. Maybe it was the music that changed society or it was the society that changed the music.

One of the biggest or most popular rock n' roll artist was Elvis. The founder of Sun Records, Sam Phillips, discovered him when he came to his studio to record a song for his mother's birthday. The thing that Elvis was most known for was his swinging hips when he performed. Young women went crazy over it and the older people dissociated themselves from it. His songs, affected by blues, folk, and country became more popular as he got famous and more pop like with catchy phrases and melodies. The funny thing though, is that Elvis didn't write any of his own stuff. It was not so usual to do that in the popular music scene. When thinking about that, you could say that it is a bit unfair that he got to be so famous, while the songwriters who had really written the songs he sang, and probably were good artists, didn't get half of the fame and wealth that he got. He was a product, an image with good hips to woo his audience and make the big money for the record label. Or was he a great artist? There are still people that worship him today. And probably it's a question of love and hate. Either they love or hate, no in between.

One song that is well known among many others is Blue Suede Shoes, written by Carl Perkins. Carl Perkins recorded it much slower than Elvis sang it, more in a rockabilly style. It's a standard 12-bar blues song, very simple and the Elvis version of it is more rhythmic, more rock n' roll.

## **Doo Wop**

<sup>2</sup>“*A form of R&B harmony vocalizing using phonetic or nonsense syllables*”

Doo Wop is vocal groups singing love songs that have simple lyrics and simple music. With use of harmonies and almost no instruments the Doo Wop genre was closest to the pop music that white young people listened to before rock n' roll. One famous group was The Chordettes with hits like Lollipop and Mr. Sandman. Lollipop is about your loved one being as sweet as a lollipop. The instruments are all in the background and there is a focus on the voices and creating good harmonies. The Doo Wop of the fifties was about innocent young love themes. Even if it was very simple and maybe not so exciting lyrics, the focus on and creation of harmonies was quite brilliant. Like in Mr. Sandman when in the beginning the different voices almost function as an instrument and give a good rhythmic starting point. As a singer it is always interesting to hear harmony arrangements, so Doo Wop in that sense is great.

## **Soul**

<sup>3</sup>“*A Merger of gospel-charged singing*”

Soul music was created by Ray Charles and came out of fifties Rn'B. It was gospel music made secular. With famous artists like Ray Charles, Marvin Gaye and Sam Cooke, the use of church music and instruments like the Rhoades in clubs created a lot of controversy. However the soul music was blooming with these great black artists becoming a part of the mainstream music charts. Even with a price - with for example Sam Cooke using the alias name “Dale Cooke” to attract a white audience. With gospel music these artists were not so popular, because it was not regarded nicely that a gospel singer would perform in clubs and taking the church music to the clubs,

---

<sup>2</sup> Notes From Class

<sup>3</sup> Notes From Class

making it secular. Sam Cooke was one of the founders of soul music. He was even called “The King of Soul”. While Ray Charles was screaming his voice sore when performing, Sam used a more soft approach with his voice. One of his many written hits was “You Send Me”, is a classic example, with very light drums and a clear soft voice.

### **Bibliography**

#### Notes From Class

Pop Music, The Text Book; J.Winterson, P. Nickol, T.Bricheno.2003