

## **Syllabus for ROCK'N'ROLL'S FIRST DECADE**

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**Course description:** An overview of the first decade of rock music, concentrating on the years 1954-1963. This course will cover the music's evolution starting from its roots in rhythm & blues and country music and its popularization in the mid-1950s by greats like Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Buddy Holly. The innovations in the early 1960s by girl groups, surf acts, and early soul singers will be covered in the final weeks, ending with the Beatles' ascendance to superstardom in their native United Kingdom.

### **Week One: The Roots of Rock**

A. Rock's African-American roots in acoustic rural and urban electric blues, gospel, swing jazz, and the hybrid of these that came to be known as rhythm and blues in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Key artists include: Muddy Waters, Louis Jordan, John Lee Hooker, Ruth Brown, and Ray Charles.

B. Rock's roots in predominantly white American forms such as Appalachian folk, hillbilly, country swing, and early country and honky-tonk. Key artists include: Woody Guthrie, Bob Wills, the Delmore Brothers, Les Paul, and Hank Snow.

C. Black and white roots music forms, along with some strains of Latin music, Tin Alley pop, and miscellaneous other styles, come together to form the foundation of rock'n'roll. Key artists include: Big Joe Turner, Junior Parker, Ike Turner, Fats Domino, the pre-"Rock Around the Clock" Bill Haley, and the pre-"Heartbreak Hotel" Elvis Presley.

Other themes: the growth of independent record labels; the post-World War II economic boom; and the rise of teenagers as a powerful force in the marketplace.

### **Week Two: Rock Takes Off**

A. Rhythm and blues moves into rock'n'roll with artists like Little Richard and Fats Domino, as well as "doo wop" vocal groups.

B. Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock" hits #1 in 1955 is the first huge rock'n'roll smash; Chuck Berry and the Platters become the first African-American acts to have Top Ten rock'n'roll hits; Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" in early 1956 tops the charts and makes both Presley and rock'n'roll an unprecedented international phenomenon.

Other themes: Early "cover" records of rock'n'roll hits by white pop artists try to dilute rock to make it more acceptable to a mainstream audience.

### **Week Three: Rock in the Mid-to-Late 1950s**

A. White southern artists from country backgrounds mix their music with rhythm and blues to follow Elvis into "rockabilly," including Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran, and Buddy Holly.

B. Rock'n'roll diversifies with white and black doo wop groups, as well as the continued success of giants like Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley.

Other themes: Rock'n'roll's unheralded role in starting to break down segregation; the rise to prominence of powerful independent rock labels like Sun Records and Atlantic Records.

### **Week Four: Rock in the Late 1950s**

A. Rock'n'roll becomes more pop-oriented, with its initial energy getting tamed somewhat, but its production and songwriting getting more sophisticated. Key artists: The Everly Brothers, Buddy Holly & the Crickets, the Drifters, Roy Orbison.

B. Rock'n'roll's survival is endangered by the deaths of Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran; the scandals and retirements that derail the careers of Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis; and the

payola scandal. Elvis Presley is inducted into the Army, and returns to music at the beginning of the 1960s with a softer sound.

C. Teen idols reach the peak of their popularity, diluting to some degree the initial force of the rock'n'roll explosion, but also spawning some worthwhile pop-rock stars. Key artists: Ricky Nelson, Dion, Del Shannon, Gene Pitney, and Philadelphia teen idols Frankie Avalon, Fabian, and Bobby Rydell.

Other themes: The rise of rock- and teenage-oriented radio; the backlash against rock'n'roll, which is blamed for juvenile delinquency and other social ills.

### **Week Five: Rock in the Early 1960s:, Instrumental Rock, The Birth of Surf, and Girl Groups**

A. Rock rediscovers tougher guitar-oriented sounds with a proliferation of instrumental groups, in turn giving birth to surf music. Key artists: the Ventures, Link Wray, Booker T. & the MGs, Dick Dale, and the Beach Boys.

B. Young female vocal harmony groups and songwriters from New York's Brill Building create the girl-group sound, with Phil Spector producing girl group hits that raise rock arrangements to a new level of sophistication. Key artists: the Shirelles, the Ronettes, the Crystals, Phil Spector, and the Shangri-Las.

Other themes;; the increased influence of rock through television, via programs like *Ozzie & Harriet* and *American Bandstand*; increasing sophistication in rock guitars and studio equipment.

### **Week Six: The Birth of Soul and the Beginnings of the British Invasion**

A. The birth of soul, as rock, rhythm and blues, and gospel merge to create the foundations of a new African-American sound. Key artists: Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson, Curtis Mayfield, Smokey Robinson, the Drifters, and James Brown.

B. The Beatles, synthesizing the best of American rock and soul, become superstars in their native United Kingdom at the end of 1963 – but have yet to have hit in the United States. Other Merseybeat rock groups from Liverpool have big hits in the UK, and the first stirrings of a bluesier, rawer British rock sound are heard in the first records of the Rolling Stones.

Other themes: growing influence of publishers and their young songwriter-producers; the beginnings of new important studios and labels in Los Angeles, Memphis, and Detroit.