

# Rock & Roll ... From The Beginning

■ It all started so quietly that no one really knew that it had begun (years later *everyone* knew). Even the record companies who made the hits that started it all were unaware that they were starting a trend that would last through three decades. Rock & roll was not anyone's hype; it happened because the kids made it happen; youth led and their elders followed.

Rock & roll did not burst full bloom on the record scene in the mid-1950s; it evolved gradually from rhythm & blues, starting back in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This was a period of violent change in pop music. The big bands had disappeared, jazz had started its withdrawal into a cult phenomenon; Mitch Miller (remembered more now for his sing-a-longs) was "revolutionizing" pop with new sounds, new gimmicks and new young talent. Country music was changing, too (at least lyrically), spurred by the genius of Hank Williams.

But it was in the r&b field that the greatest changes were in the making. Until World War II r&b was dominated by the three major firms (RCA Victor, Bluebird, Columbia-Okeh, Decca-Brunswick), a position they gave up during the war due to shortages of shellac for 78 rpm records. Post-war they concentrated mainly on pop and country music. Into this vacuum moved a number of young, aggressive and highly talented individuals who started their own independent r&b labels. They



SHAKE, RATTLE & ROLL: Ahmet Ertegun, Jerry Wexler, Joe Turner.

included Herman Lubinsky of Savoy-Regent, Art Rupe of Specialty, Lou Chudd of Imperial, Ike and Bess Berman of Apollo, Leo and Eddie Messner of Aladdin, the Braun Brothers of DeLuxe, Herb Abrahamson and

Ahmet Ertegun of Atlantic—later joined by Jerry Wexler, Jules and Saul Bahari of RPM-Modern, Don Robey of Duke-Peacock, Syd Nathan of King-Federal, and Leonard and Phil Chess of Chess Records.

## The Big Beat

These men, many of whom acted as talent scouts, producers, songwriters, arrangers and even engineers on recording sessions (and became salesmen after the product was made), molded the shape of r&b for the future, and in doing so, created rock & roll. R&b was an outgrowth of country and urban blues, jazz, and elements of pop music, with two outstanding, over-riding characteristics: a lot of bass and a big beat. Anyone who failed to hear the bottom or the beat on an r&b record was either deaf or dead, and few teenagers were either.

At the same time that these independent r&b labels were starting, a great shift was occurring in geographic patterns among blacks. After World War II there were great migrations on the part of blacks from the rural South to Northern cities like New York and Chicago. This brought many talented young singers and musicians to the very cities where the new r&b labels had established their recording studios. Many of these artists wrote and performed their own material but where they did not their producers often did. Ahmet Ertegun of Atlantic has a score of tunes to his credit as Nugetre (Ertegun spelled backwards), and Leiber and Stoller, one of the key r&b producing teams of the 1950s, wrote hits for the Coasters, Elvis, and dozens of other r&b stars.

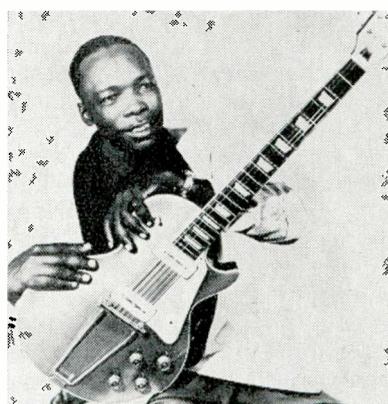
In the 1920s, '30s and '40s, much of what we call rhythm & blues today was known as "race series" or "sepia series" records. In the late 1940s, Billboard's music department (Editor Paul Ackerman and staffers Jerry Wexler and Hal Webman) decided the term "race records" was distasteful. They polled record manufacturers for a more apt name and came up with rhythm & blues.

R&b of the 1950s, however, was not simply the "race" music of the 1940s. The songs were more sophisticated and the backing was infinitely more varied and more complex, often featuring horns and a sax solo, and always an amplified guitar and bass. Occasionally there was a chorus in the back singing the fills. Now and then

there was a wild arrangement featuring an oboe or a cello. From time to time there were duets with a leading female and male r&b star. But always, no matter what, there was that big, big beat.

## Growing R&B Audience

By the early 1950s there was a considerable group of best-selling r&b artists with substantial followings. They included Louis Jordan, Dinah Washington, Arthur Crudup, Roy Milton, the Ravens, Sonny Til & the Orioles, the Five Keys, the Spaniels, Ivory Joe Hunter, Wynonie Harris, Memphis Slim, Jimmy Witherspoon, Big Maybelle, John Lee Hooker, Big



BOOGIE CHILLEN: John Lee Hooker.

Jay McNeely, Amos Millburn, Charles Brown, Johnny Otis, Little Esther, Lowell Fulson, Fats Domino, Roy Brown, Tiny Bradshaw, Ray Charles, Muddy Waters, Joe Turner, Billy Ward and the Dominoes (including Clyde McPhatter and Jackie Wilson), Howlin' Wolf, Percy Mayfield, Ruth Brown and B. B. King.

The following that these artists had, with rare exceptions like Louis Jordan and Dinah Washington, was primarily black. Basically records by these artists were made for the black audience and most of their sales were in black markets. Few downtown stores carried r&b records.

What was true of stores was also true of radio. Few pop stations ever played r&b records. They would play records by artists such as Nat King Cole, Billy Eckstine, etc., as long as the artist sang pop material, but hardly ever if the artist sang r&b tunes. Louis Jordan, with his novelty-type songs, or novelty hits like "Open The Door, Richard," did get pop play. But little else.

There was one way whites, as well as blacks, could get to hear r&b records. That was through r&b stations which usually

broadcast only r&b with occasional spins of pop records by soul brothers like Cole and Eckstine. It may have been difficult for a white youngster to get to a ghetto area to buy r&b records, but there was no problem in tuning into an r&b station. Every large city had them. They were usually white-owned but the disc jockeys, newsmen and occasionally, the program directors, were black. Since the station catered to the black market, the deejays could play all of the r&b records they chose.

White youngsters did tune in. Not a lot of them in 1950, but many. More in 1951, and still more in 1952. They tuned in for almost the same reason that white kids tuned into independent (non-network) stations in the 1930s to hear music by bands like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw and the Dorseys. They couldn't hear the big bands on the network stations and swing bands had the guts and the beat that the kids wanted. In the 1950s the white kids wanted the beat of r&b.

They wanted the beat because the pop music scene was very pale. Mitch Miller and his stable of young artists at Columbia Records were creating the most exciting pop sounds around. But to a music listener of 13, it's understandable that "Come On-A-My House" or "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Clause" did not have the same impact as "Night Train" or "Good Lovin'." By 1953-54 there was a considerable group of white youngsters throughout the country who dug r&b, who listened to it on r&b stations and who purchased r&b records whenever they could find them.

The pop music scene was ripe for revolution. All it needed was a leader. A leader came out of the West ... from Cleveland, of all places.

## Enter Alan Freed

Alan Freed was a disc jockey at radio station WJW in Cleveland in the early 1950s. He played pop records, i.e., Count Basie, Tony Bennett, etc. His show had no particular rating and at that moment in his life Freed was an unlikely choice to lead the r&b revolution. One day he was in a local record shop that carried r&b hits. He was struck by the fact that so many young white kids were buying r&b discs. He decided to use a few of them on

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