

James Miller,

Flowers in the Dustbin.

The Rise of Rock and Roll

(1947-1977)

(1999)

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December 28, 1947:

"Good Rockin' Tonight"

As epochal events go, it was modest, unimpressive—and, at the time, all but ignored. The site was a nondescript recording studio in Cincinnati, Ohio. The occasion was a recording session for a company unknown to most Americans, King. The agent of change was a singer named Wynonie Harris, thirty-two years old, also practically unknown. In most respects, there was nothing noteworthy about the setting, the singer, or his songs. But one of the songs Harris sang on December 28, 1947, "Good Rockin' Tonight," would become a best-selling hit, played on jukeboxes and aired on radio stations across black America. And by popularizing the word "rock," Harris' recording would herald a new era in American popular culture.

Nobody noticed. In December of 1947, the music we now call "rock and roll" hadn't yet been named, much less invented. When Harris sang his pathbreaking song, he was simply doing what he had done for years, practicing a time-honored craft he had mastered in an old-fashioned way, through trial and error, learning how to make music that would lift listeners up, put people into motion, and let them dance the night away.

"Hence the dance hall as temple," the novelist and critic Albert Murray has written: "Hence all the ceremonially deliberate drag steps and shaking and grinding movements during, say, the old downhome Saturday Night Function, and all the sacramental strutting and swinging along with all the elegant stromping. . . . And hence in consequence the fundamental function of the blues musician (also known as the jazz musician), the most obvious as well as the most pragmatic mission of whose performance is not only to drive the blues away and hold them at bay at least for the time being, but also to evoke an ambiance of Dionysian revelry."

In the way that Wynonie Harris had lived his life, and made his music, his objective was plain and simple: it was revelry, the more "Dionysian" the better. At the time he recorded "Good Rockin'

Tonight," he was already a minor legend. Renowned for his fast living and hard drinking, he'd been playing Saturday Night Functions from coast to coast since the mid-Forties, building up a reputation as one of the wildest black showmen of his day. Photographs show a coffee-colored Clark Gable, debonair, cocky, a gleam in his eyes, the promise of pleasure on his lips.

A generation later, Harris would have become a pinup for kids, a pop culture icon, just like Michael Jackson or Prince, two of his spiritual heirs. But in 1947, he was, by comparison, a nobody—an anonymous journeyman. In those days, there were few magazines devoted to pop music, no TV shows about it (television was still in its infancy), and little mainstream media coverage of Negro stars like Wynonie Harris.* Despite the widespread popularity in America of black dance music and of certain black entertainers, such as Louis Armstrong, the Mills Brothers, and the Ink Spots, patterns of social segregation cut deep. Inhabiting a common culture, whites and blacks still lived largely in worlds apart.

Harris had first achieved fame in the world of black music with Lucky Millinder, who led one of Harlem's hottest dance bands. After scoring a vocal hit with the Millinder band in 1945—it was a good-natured blues novelty, "Who Threw the Whiskey in the Well?"—Harris went solo, recording for several different small labels, and selling just enough copies to sustain his career.

His session for King after Christmas in 1947 hardly promised anything out of the ordinary. As was customary in those days, the session was scheduled to last three hours and produce three or four usable takes of three or four new songs. The band consisted of seasoned musicians, most of them jazzmen like Oran "Hot Lips" Page, an alumnus of Count Basie's renowned Kansas City band. As usual, the label's A&R man (for "artists and repertoire") had selected the songs for the band to play. The tunes ran the gamut. One was a risqué novelty, long since forgotten, called "Lollipop Mama." Another tune, "I Believe I'll Fall in Love," was even less distinguished. Songs like this—and the fare was typical—did not give a singer much to work with. Still, if luck was with him—if Harris caught the right

*I should explain the racial terms used in the book. "Colored" and "Negro" were terms in common usage in America well into the Sixties, when "black" became preferred in many contexts, just as "African-American" is often preferred today. All of these terms appear at various points in this text, as the historical context dictates.

feeling, if his band hit a relaxed rhythmic groove—even the most hackneyed of songs might let a blues musician fulfill his fundamental function, making music of sufficient energy and earthiness to provoke an outburst of emotion that carried listeners away.

The composer of "Good Rockin' Tonight" was a young singer named Roy Brown, a native of New Orleans and a fan of Wynonie Harris. Legend has it that Brown, inspired by hearing Harris in person, wrote the song on a paper bag and offered it to "Mister Blues" (his nickname) backstage. When Harris refused the gift, Brown sang the song himself at his first recording session. Brown's version was selling well in the South, and so came to the attention of Harris' new A&R man at King, Henry Glover, a big band veteran charged with finding fresh "repertoire" for his "artists."

The song's rhythmic style was apt. This was the heyday, in black popular music, of a relaxed kind of boogie-woogie—the musical backbone of "Good Rockin' Tonight." Almost offhandedly, Harris and his combo transformed the song into a celebration of everything dance music can be: an incantation, an escape, an irrepressibly joyous expression of sheer physical existence.

They took Brown's song at an easy lope. The band was loose, Harris in rare form. A sax riffed, a piano pumped, and Harris shouted: "Have you heard the news? There's good rockin' tonight!"

Five months later, the news was out. By June of 1948, Harris' record was spinning on jukeboxes from coast to coast. The era of "good rockin'" had arrived.

Or so it would later seem. To chronicle the past is to search for some place to start, some more or less arbitrary moment to begin: and more than one historian of rock has thought to open his story with "Good Rockin' Tonight." Not that experts can agree. In 1992, an account of fifty pioneering rock and roll recordings demonstrated the intractability of the question posed by the book's title, *What Was the First Rock 'n Roll Record?*

Questions of historical priority scarcely preoccupied Wynonie Harris. Born in 1915 in Omaha, Nebraska, he had honed his talents in the Midwest, performing as a buck dancer, a drummer, a singer, touring with carnivals, doing vaudeville, entertaining at minstrel shows, covering a territory that ran from the Dakotas in the north to Oklahoma in the south.

The undisputed cultural capital of this territory was Kansas City. And it was in Kansas City that Wynonie Harris first heard Joe

Turner—and first found his true calling. “He went crazy over the big blues shouter,” Preston Love, one of Harris’ lifelong friends later recalled. “He thought the blues was a way of life—an only life, and he patterned himself as a singer after Joe Turner.”

In the 1930s, when Harris first visited Kansas City, Joe Turner was tending bar, bouncing bums, and singing the blues at a club called the Sunset—the kind of place that later rock and roll stars could only dream about. Located at Twelfth and Woodlawn, the club was surrounded by dozens of other saloons, promising an endless supply of whiskey, women, and song. Tricks were two dollars an orgasm, marijuana three sticks for a quarter. In these days, Kansas City was a mecca for white revelers and black musicians, attracting one of the greatest concentrations of jazz talent in history: Count Basie, Lester Young, Ben Webster, Buck Clayton, Andy Kirk, Mary Lou Williams, Jay McShann, Charlie Parker—the list goes on. Every night after hours, musicians like this converged on the Sunset to blow the blues away, in the process refining the jazz form called swing—dance music with a sleek pulse, bursting with energy and brimming with riffs: short fusillades of melodic ostinato, repeated, developed, elaborated, repeated again, reinforcing the music’s rhythmic thrust, cutting through the air like the night train to Memphis.

The Sunset was a tiny place, roughly twelve feet wide and sixty feet deep, a “black and tan” with a bandstand at one end and a rope down the middle to separate the black patrons from the whites (or “tans”), who in the Thirties were numerous—this, after all, was the heyday of swing, the style of popular music preferred by most Americans, white and black. The Sunset’s house pianist in these years was Pete Johnson, the best in the city, a boogie-woogie virtuoso with a rock-steady sense of time that sent patrons flocking to the dance floor. A primitive amplification system piped the music into the darkened streets, allowing Johnson’s partner, Big Joe, to “call his children home,” summoning customers inside. Turner served drinks and sang at the same time. He handed down the bleakest of lyrics—“you may be beautiful, but you gonna die some day”—with unswerving authority and infectious good humor. Sometimes, as Turner later recalled, “we’d start playing around three in the morning. The bossman would set up pitchers of corn-likker, and we’d rock”—which gives an idea of one thing that Wynonie Harris may have had in mind when he sang about “good rockin’” ten years later.

The world had changed in the interim. Kansas City’s wonder years

were over. But the city’s riffing style of swing lived on, not least in the music of Wynonie Harris.

A tall, handsome man from a racially mixed background (one of his wives would later claim that his father had been an American Indian by the name of Blue Jay), Harris was dapper and slim, with striking eyes of bluish green and a pencil-thin mustache—a far cry from Joe Turner, who was a blues version of Paul Bunyan. During World War II, Harris, like Turner, had joined the great black migration of these years to the West Coast, where work could be found in wartime factories running round the clock. Both men ended up in Los Angeles, where they regularly performed together, sometimes staging a friendly “cutting” session, as if to summon the memory of times past at the Sunset.

In 1947, Harris and Turner recorded a series of duets, including a boisterous “Battle of the Blues” that nicely illustrates the difference in their styles. Swapping boasts about their sexual prowess, Turner as usual sounds earthy, offhand, almost absentmindedly lustful—a force of nature, untamed and sublime. Harris by contrast is dogged, strident, strenuously energetic.

He made a career out of bellowing off-color novelties, drinking songs; and raucous blues. “I Want My Fanny Brown” was one jukebox favorite, “I Like My Baby’s Pudding” another. Dumb double entendres didn’t faze him. A prototypical “rock” singer, he attacked the most inane of lyrics with melodramatic gusto.

The 1940s was a time of change in the music that most Americans listened to. In mainstream pop, the big bands were being replaced by crooners like Vaughn Monroe and Perry Como. In the world of jazz, dance music was out, bebop was in, turning the art of improvisation into a form as demanding as anything heard in European concert halls. As jazz ceased to be a truly popular music, even among blacks, the so-called race charts published by the music trade magazine *Billboard*—charts meant to document the recorded music black Americans preferred to hear—registered a historic shift: the hot new style was jump, a simplified and superheated version of old-fashioned swing, often boogie-woogie based, usually played by a small combo of piano, bass, and drums, with saxophone and trumpet.

From its streamlined riffs to the genre’s very name, jump owed a large debt to the Kansas City scene of the 1930s. Count Basie had shown the way with “One O’Clock Jump.” But the genre’s greatest postwar exponent was the singer and saxophonist Louis Jordan, a

native of Arkansas later based in New York City and Los Angeles. In a string of popular recordings that began in 1942, and included four million-sellers ("G.I. Jive," "Caldonia," "Choo Choo Ch'Boogie," and "Saturday Night Fish Fry"), Jordan perfected a propulsive, boogie-woogie-based style of swing, animated by a clownish stage manner he had inherited from Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, and Cab Calloway. At the height of Jordan's ~~career, between~~ 1944 and 1946, his recordings were as popular with whites as with blacks. One of his biggest hits, "G.I. Jive," actually topped the normally lily-white "folk" (or country-western) chart in 1944, becoming the first recording in history to top simultaneously all three *Billboard* charts (pop, race, and folk). Despite his huge white following, Jordan was unapologetically black. Before him, the black stars most popular with white listeners, such as Louis Armstrong, the Mills Brothers, and the Ink Spots, had hurdled America's racial divide by singing Tin Pan Alley material. Jordan took a different tack, singing songs filled with images from ghetto life ("Saturday Night Fish Fry," for example, recounts a police raid on a block party). And though his flair for comedy took the sting out of his lyrics, and sometimes brought Jordan to the brink of self-parody, he was a committed entertainer, a peerless bandleader—and for any up-and-coming jump blues star, the man to beat.

For one striking moment—in the studio that December day in 1947—Wynonie Harris did just that. Like Jordan's classic hits, Harris' "Good Rockin' Tonight" swings effortlessly. An epitome of the jump genre, the record opens with a growling trumpet fanfare. The bass player doubles the pianist's pumping left hand, and hand-clapping reinforces the drummer's backbeat. Knocking out a perfect boogie beat, the group hews to a formula, but the formula is tried and true: ten years later, it would be all but impossible to locate five musicians able to animate the same simple riffs with such style and élan. Harris himself was in rare form. Uncommonly subdued, he sings with blithe artistry. Apart from a feverish sax solo, the song glides by.

Harris' recording turned into one of the biggest race hits of 1948: in June, it topped *Billboard* magazine's weekly lists of both Most-Played Juke Box Race Records and Best Selling Retail Race Records. Its popularity triggered a small boom in race records that highlighted the word "rock." In the months that followed, there was Joe Luther's "Rockin' Boogie," the tenor saxophonist Wild Bill Moore's

"We're Gonna Rock, We're Gonna Roll," vocalist Roy Brown's "Rockin' at Midnight," Jimmy Preston's "Rock the Joint," and yet another Wild Bill Moore disc, this one with the pithy and prophetic title "Rock and Roll."

Prophetic or not, these records at first changed little in the music most Americans listened to, or in the culture that most Americans inhabited. Distributed primarily on jukeboxes located in Negro clubs and bars, none of these pioneering "rock" records reached the larger white audience—not even Wynonie Harris' exuberant version of "Good Rockin' Tonight."

The primary problem was not the color of the musicians' skins—Louis Jordan after all played a virtually identical brand of music. The problem was the word "rock." As the record's A&R man, Henry Glover, later explained, "we were restricted with our possibilities of promoting this song because it was considered filth"—and though "filth" was acceptable on a ghetto jukebox, it was not acceptable on most radio shows: "They had a definition in those days of the word 'rock,' meaning the sex act, rather than having it known as 'a good time,' as they did later."

In the late 1940s, Glover was a talent and song scout for King. A label founded in 1943, King was owned and operated by Syd Nathan, a Cincinnati record retailer. Priding himself on his prowess as a salesman, Nathan had made a small fortune by "selling records in a location that nobody could sell a record in," as he told his sales staff in 1951—"it was like trying to sell a grand piano out in the desert. But we done business because we knew how to do business."

Nathan had started up King by recording hillbilly artists, and quickly made his mark in the folk field. Branching into race music, Nathan in 1946 hired Glover, a former trumpeter and arranger in Lucky Millinder's big band, and one of the first black men in the postwar record business to be given any creative clout. It was Glover's job to help his label's artists by finding songs, booking studios, hiring musicians, and supervising the recording sessions. Like Nathan, Glover "knew how to do business." One of the first artists he signed and supervised for Nathan was Bullmoose Jackson, a popular baritone who would produce naughty novelties and lugubrious ballads for King starting in 1946.

The commercial success of labels like King in these years was symptomatic of a number of concurrent changes in the American music industry. As cheap and improved record players came on the

market after World War II, retail sales of recordings grew rapidly, particularly in the areas of country music and rhythm and blues. Registering the change, *Billboard* in May 1948 augmented its old charts listing jukebox favorites with two new charts listing the week's best-selling retail recordings of race and folk music. The new popular interest in both black and country music grew out of the wartime experience of a large number of Americans: thanks to the regional and racial mixing that had occurred in the armed forces, and also thanks to the heterogeneous musical fare piped round the world on armed forces radio programs and V-Discs, a generation had been exposed to a range of musical styles far wider than anything heard on the live variety shows broadcast by America's national radio networks in the 1930s. At the same time, the country's established labels, faced with a shortage of shellac during the war, had sharply cut back their involvement in musical genres they deemed marginal. The reluctance of the major labels to meet a growing demand left the field wide open for independent entrepreneurs like Syd Nathan.

The postwar independent record business was risky and brawling—but Syd Nathan was a pugnacious entrepreneur. As an associate later recalled, he was a “short, round, rough, gruff man with a nose like Porky Pig and two Coca-Cola bottles for eyeglasses.” He smoked cigars, growled hoarsely, and governed his record label like a modern-day fiefdom, barking out orders to underlings. He turned King into one of the few vertically integrated operations in the music business. He owned his own studio, he owned the plant that stamped his records, and he owned the press that printed King's record jackets. He also drove hard bargains, offering his race and folk artists a flat fee to record, and taking care to purchase the copyright on virtually every song that his label issued. The most lucrative aspect of the music business is song publishing: whoever owns the publishing rights to a piece of music is in a position to make money every time the sheet music or a recording of the song is sold, and virtually every time the music is performed live, or a recording of it is broadcast. Trying to maximize his profits, Nathan became a virtuoso at imaginatively exploiting his catalogue of songs, having his folk acts record race songs that he owned, and vice versa: one of Wynonie Harris' biggest hits was a remake of an earlier country hit for King, Hank Penny's “Bloodshot Eyes.” Cheerfully philistine by temperament, Nathan took special pride in making money from smutty songs no

other label would touch, churning out off-color records with titles like “I Want a Bowlegged Woman,” the notorious “Work With Me Annie,” and its equally notorious sequel, “Annie Had a Baby.”

“The first thing you learn is that everyone is a liar,” Syd Nathan once snapped to an inquiring reporter: “The only thing that matters is the song. Buy the song, own the song, but remember, no matter what anyone tells you, they are liars until they have convinced you they are telling the truth.”

Nathan's vulgarity was legendary—but in Wynonie Harris, he met his match. In 1947, Nathan and an associate journeyed to New York City to talk Harris into signing with King. As Nathan told the story a few years later, they found Mister Blues “in a backstreet dingy hotel in Harlem. . . . And when we knocked on the door, he says ‘come in,’ and there were three gals in the room with him. All naked. So one of them opened her mouth, and he threw her out in the hall without any clothes on. . . . So we sat there talking to this drunk, stupid individual—and if he were here I'd tell it to him (he's got a little more sense since then)—till six o'clock in the morning.” As the sun rose in the east, Harris signed with King.

“Good Rockin’ Tonight” was the first in a series of best-sellers that Harris recorded for Nathan's label. The consistent popularity of his recordings for King over the next five years made him wealthy and famous.

“As a statement of fact, clean of any attempt to brag about it, I'm the highest-paid blues singer in the business,” Harris boasted in 1954 (just as his star was starting to fade). “I'm a \$1,500 a week man. Most of the other fellows sing for \$50 to \$75 a night. I don't. That is why I'm no Broadway star. The crooners star on the Great White Way and get swamped with Coca-Cola-drinking bobby-soxers and other ‘jail bait.’ I star in Georgia, Texas, Alabama, Tennessee and Missouri and get those who have money to buy stronger stuff and my records to play while they drink it. I like to sing to women with meat on their bones and that long, green stuff in their pockets. You find them mostly down south. As a matter of fact, I like all kinds of women, regardless of what color they are or what size and shape they may have. Just so long as they're breathing, that's me!”

Such vainglory was a sign of “good rockin’ ” to come. For Wynonie Harris and those who would follow in his footsteps, from Chuck Berry to Mick Jagger to Prince, the new music would, in time, become what Big Joe Turner's blues had been at the Sunset in Kansas

set aside for the city's rapidly growing black population (nearly 40 percent of the city's total of 300,000). Most of the black newcomers had come straight from small towns and farms in adjacent Mississippi. The mechanization of cotton harvesting in the 1930s had destroyed the sharecropper system, triggering a mass migration from the Delta, a wedge of fertile farmland that stretched south from Memphis toward Vicksburg, Mississippi. Some of the migrants moved farther north, to St. Louis or Chicago. But others, unwilling to stray far from home, looked for work in Memphis. The newcomers brought with them country habits and a taste for old-fashioned country blues, an elemental and harshly rhythmic style of music that Dewey Phillips would make a mainstay of his radio program.

A music of relative simplicity and raw power, the form of blues commonly heard on the Delta differed from the styles popular in other areas. As the music historian Robert Palmer has observed, "the Mississippi Delta's blues musicians sang with unmatched intensity in a gritty, melodically circumscribed, highly ornamented style that was closer to field hollers than it was to other blues." Where the jazz-based jump bands that came out of Kansas City were sleek and swinging, the Delta blues bands were jagged and rough; where a singer like Joe Turner projected a feeling of easy mastery, a classic Delta bluesman like Charley Patton howled and growled, mangling diction, swallowing words, in some recordings from the 1930s carrying on what sounds like a febrile conversation with himself, using different voices, from a piercing falsetto to a sandpaper baritone.

It was rough-and-ready music for a Saturday Night Function, and Dewey Phillips hawked it like snake oil. A freckle-faced redhead raised in rural Tennessee, he had become a fixture on the Memphis scene after the war. Before joining the staff of WHBQ, he had worked the public address system at Grant's Dime Store downtown, blaring records and jabbering advertisements, developing the wild delivery he would perfect on *Red Hot and Blue*. Broadcasting from the mezzanine of the Old Chisca Hotel on Main Street, he brought the savage sound of the Delta blues to Memphians of all races, filling the air with barrelhouse boogie. To hear the latest in black music, there was now no need to sneak into a juke joint, or steal across the tracks to visit a record store. After the evening of October 29, 1949, one simply had to keep the radio set on Memphis' all-purpose (and most powerful) radio station, WHBQ—and wait till nightfall for *Red Hot and Blue*.

City—"a way of life," a free life, an "only life." Organized, like jump, around the single-minded pursuit of simple musical pleasures, rock, too, would hold out the promise of wealth, of fame, of physical gratification without measure or limit. And all for a song!

October 29, 1949:

Red Hot and Blue

The sun had set and the radio was rocking. The deejay's patter was manic, his voice a blur, his words a jumble. "Get your bald-headed nanny goat runnin' through the front door," the man said breathlessly, jamming together syllables and words and sentences without pause, as if without punctuation, "tell 'em Phillips sencha down there from *Red Hot 'n' Blue* the next fifteen minutes of *Red Hot 'n' Blue* is comin' to ya through the courtesy of that good Old Amigo Flour we're gonna play the next record for LeAnn Sandwich for Erma King Annie L. Sandwich for Cathy for W.J. Johnson also for Yumma Black for Ernie Black for Porter for Ruby Young I believe it is a call for Monroe Williams and the title is 'Say you ever get booted' here's a record that's gettin' hot man 'Bootied' by Roscoe Gordon!"

A drum rolled. A raspy voice shouted out, "Jack, man! Have you ever been booted?"

A chorus shouted back. "Did you say booted?"

"Yeah, man. Booted!"

A piano shuffled into a boogie beat—and another hour of the Dewey Phillips show began on radio station WHBQ in Memphis, Tennessee.

Phillips first aired his show on October 29, 1949, filling a forty-five-minute slot from 10:15 until 11:00 at night. But within weeks, Phillips was on the air from 9:00 till midnight, hawking flour, spinning records—and changing, forever, the way white people would hear black music.

Memphis in 1949 was a boomtown. It was also a bastion of segregation, with separate (and unequal) parks, schools, and restaurants

Dewey Phillips epitomized a new phenomenon: the celebrity disc jockey. A strictly regional radio star who talked with a strictly regional accent, Phillips made a virtue out of being different, spurning the conventions of radio broadcasting from the down-home drawl in his delivery to the down-home music he aired. Throughout the 1930s, local radio programming had been largely supplied by *national* networks. The network announcers, as the official voice of a self-consciously *national* medium, invariably sounded urbane, educated, colorless, using clear diction and a soothing tone to summon Americans together to hear melodramas, news, fireside chats by the President, live broadcasts of everything from dance concerts to the Metropolitan Opera—almost anything, in fact, but recordings; and least of all, recordings of identifiably regional styles of music. For better or worse, the national networks in these years functioned as great cultural equalizers, transmitting more or less the same variety of live entertainment and news to every listener, whether white or black, rich or poor.

All this changed with the introduction of commercial television after World War II, though it took some time for the new medium to reach the hinterlands (Memphis, for example, got its first TV station only in 1948). As national broadcast networks like NBC and CBS shifted their resources from radio to television, local radio affiliates were forced to devote more and more time to local programming, much of it, by necessity, featuring prerecorded music. Disc jockeys—the men who chatted with the audience and played the recordings—assumed a new importance. In order to be competitive, announcers had to have an edge, an image, a distinctive on-air personality; and it didn't hurt if they played a distinctive style of music, too. As never before, stations were willing to experiment with new formats. And by the end of the 1940s, it was clear that shows featuring race records were attracting a large and growing audience, particularly in the South.

These shows would, in time, help break down old barriers between white and black, quickening America's movement toward black civil rights. But the race format was itself a by-product of segregation. For years, advertisers interested in pitching certain products at Negro consumers had sponsored separate radio segments that featured black-themed programming. The national radio networks had routinely featured the big bands of Duke Ellington and Count Basie, while in Memphis WHBQ had long made a practice of airing the *Midnight Ramble*, a show featuring black musicians staged for an

all-white audience every Thursday night at the Palace Theater. The trick, particularly in the segregated South, was to pitch products at black listeners without surrendering control to black personalities. In the early years, the vast majority of disc jockeys airing black music were white, from Dewey Phillips in Memphis and "John R." Richbourg in Nashville to Zenas "Daddy" Sears in Atlanta and Hunter Hancock in Los Angeles.

These disc jockeys prospered by exploiting a lucrative new market. After the war, the income of African-Americans, historically depressed, grew even more quickly than that of whites. In a city like Memphis, certain commodities were disproportionately bought by blacks. A pioneering survey of Negro consumers in Memphis, conducted in 1952, revealed that black Memphians consumed 80 percent of the city's packaged rice, 70 percent of its canned milk, and 65 percent of its all-purpose flour. The same survey showed that radios, once beyond the means of the average black family, had become a standard appliance—in Memphis alone, 93 percent of black households owned a radio, and 30 percent owned two. Advertisers eager to reach this newly affluent audience naturally turned to radio shows that featured race music.

Memphis became a national leader in black radio programming. In addition to *Red Hot and Blue*, the catalyst was WDIA, the nation's first radio station to feature all-black music played by an all-black staff of disc jockeys, a policy instituted in 1948. Though it broadcast only from dawn to dusk, WDIA by the fall of 1949 was one of the most popular radio stations in Memphis. It was, in fact, the size of WDIA's daytime audience that convinced WHBQ to experiment with the race format at night.

Red Hot and Blue was an instant hit. As WHBQ's program director later recalled, Phillips "got something like seven requests his first night. Well, the next night, I don't know the exact amount, but it was more like seventy requests. Then, even more incredible, the next night, it was closer to seven hundred."

For nearly a decade, Dewey Phillips was the most popular radio personality in Memphis. At the peak of his popularity in the mid-Fifties, he reached an estimated 100,000 listeners on an average night. A big part of the appeal was Phillips himself. His on-air patter blazed with bizarre asides and absurd non sequiturs, delivered in a primeval piney-woods drawl, evoking the sharecropper's son as unbuttoned hipster.

The earliest known aircheck of the show, recorded on December 3, 1951, captures the mood and texture of a typical night—and demonstrates that Phillips routinely programmed the roughest and most down-home kind of Delta-style blues. After starting with Roscoe Gordon's "Booted," a stomping boogie, Phillips continued with Muddy Waters' "She Moves Me," a now classic piece of Chicago blues, featuring Little Walter on harmonica. Briefly he changed the pace with a seasonal tune, Lowell Fulson's "Lonesome Christmas," before closing the fifteen-minute slot (during which he kept constantly plugging Old Amigo Flour) with Elmore James and his slashing original version of "Dust My Broom," featuring Sonny Boy Williamson on harmonica.

This set of songs was a reflection of regional taste. In 1951, Roscoe Gordon lived in Memphis, while Elmore James and Sonny Boy Williamson worked out of West Memphis, Arkansas. Though Muddy Waters had moved to Chicago in 1943, he had grown up in Clarksdale, Mississippi, in the heart of the Delta, some sixty miles south of Memphis. Even Lowell Fulson, who by 1951 was based in California, had gotten his start in the Southwest, working a territory that included Memphis.

The music all of these men played was evidently what the listeners to *Red Hot and Blue* wanted to hear—and a far cry, ironically, from the more urbane and jazz-oriented fare broadcast during the day on WDIA. Because it was earthy and often musically crude, the brand of music that Phillips routinely played was regarded as demeaning by many educated Negroes—the core of the audience that WDIA initially wished to attract. In these years, it was, paradoxically, easier for a white deejay like Phillips to air unrefined Delta blues on a predominantly white-oriented station like WHBQ than it was for a pioneering black deejay like Nat D. Williams to play the same music on an all-black station like WDIA. And that was not the end of the paradoxes. For the fact that this music was aired on a predominantly white station gave it a new kind of cultural cachet among blacks, even as it permitted white listeners to tune in without guilt.

In effect, Dewey Phillips turned every night in Memphis into a kind of make-believe "Midnight Ramble." Working in the most ephemeral of mediums—it is all but impossible today to hear even a sample of what Phillips in his prime sounded like—he presided over a new kind of community, one that was largely invisible (since most of his listeners were sitting at home) and at first inconsequential

(since as radio surveys showed in the early Fifties, a surprising number of his listeners turned out to be teenagers). But soon enough, the signs of this new community would be everywhere in Memphis, from the blues records on the jukeboxes in soda fountains to the black bands hired to play at white country clubs.

It wasn't the end of segregation—but it was the beginning of the end. And in time, every city in America would experience its own version of this musical great awakening, often through the magic of a show like *Red Hot and Blue*. The sun would go down. The radio would light up. And for a small but rapidly growing number of young white listeners, many still largely unknown to one another, the very strangeness of the music—its dreamlike distance from any world they had personally experienced—made it a powerful antidote to boredom, an invitation to fantasy, an image of freedom.

April 1950:

Fender Guitars

The bands heard on the race hits of the late 1940s were small combos, usually featuring a boogie-woogie pianist, a honking saxophonist, and sometimes a lead guitarist. They played loose and loud. Music with a big beat, it still wasn't loose enough, or loud enough, to be rock and roll. For that, something else was needed—instruments able to make a bigger noise.

In 1950, such an instrument appeared. It was the Fender Esquire, the first mass-produced, solid-body electric guitar. The instrument's fret board was bolted to a flat plank of wood equipped with a pickup—a magnet wound with a steel coil that converted the vibrations of the metal strings into an electronic signal, which was in turn converted into sound by means of an amplifier and loudspeaker.

Over the next decade, this solid-body design was refined and perfected by Leo Fender—the Thomas Edison of the rock era. Fender wasn't the first person to build an electric guitar, nor were his electric guitars the best—only the most memorable. It seems fitting that the tombstone of rock's first martyr, Buddy Holly, should depict the sil-

houette of a Fender Stratocaster, the futuristic solid-body guitar he had played. By 1959, the year of Holly's plane crash, the outline of Fender's uniquely formed guitar perfectly symbolized the dead man, and his musical gift to the world.

Acoustic guitars use a hollow wooden cavity to project the sound of the vibrating strings out toward listeners. At first, inventors tried simply to amplify this sound. Too often, the result was distortion and unwanted feedback, a piercing howl produced when an amplified signal is inadvertently amplified again. A radio repairman by vocation, Leo Fender had watched in the 1930s as early electric guitarists struggled to tame their unruly instruments. Near the end of his life, Fender explained how his electric guitar differed from all those that had come before. "On an acoustic electric guitar you have a string fastened to a diaphragm top, and that top does not have one specific frequency. If you play a note the top will respond to it and also to a lot of adjoining notes," producing distortion, particularly at higher levels of amplification; "a solid-body doesn't have that, you're dealing with just a single note at a time." In effect, Fender's solid body design, by eliminating the diaphragm top, allowed each string to be amplified cleanly, without unwanted feedback—thus enabling electric guitarists to play louder than ever before.

The Esquire was only one of Leo Fender's inventions. Born on a farm near Anaheim, California, in 1909, just eight years after Marconi succeeded in using wireless radio waves to transmit the letter S across the Atlantic Ocean, he had come of age in a world where phonographs and radios were still awe-inspiring innovations, machines with a conjurer's power to reproduce sounds. Fascinated by the prospect of harnessing that power, Fender developed a passion for electrical engineering. A lifelong country music fan, he began to tinker with guitars in his teens, and by the 1930s he was experimenting with the pick ups used to amplify guitars. In 1931, Fender opened a radio, music, and record store in Southern California. In the years that followed, he experimented with new electric guitar designs, and also built his own public address amplification systems, which he rented out for sporting and entertainment events. At the same time, he was working on other devices, among them a reliable record changer. After the war, Fender decided to sell his design for the record changer, using the profits to build a new plant in Fullerton, California, for manufacturing electric guitar equipment.

In 1948, when Fender's first guitar rolled off his plant's assembly

line, amplified instruments were still something of a novelty. The sound of swirling violins marked the mainstream pop of the era, while the timbres of the big band—trumpets, saxes, piano—still dominated jazz and jump blues. Even in country music, where the guitar had long been ubiquitous as a rhythm instrument, it was still generally strummed in the background, leaving the melody and improvisation to a banjo, or mandolin, or a keening fiddle.

Fender's electric guitars would help change all that—but change was already in the air. Earlier in the decade, a Texas musician named T-Bone Walker had introduced the electric guitar as a lead voice in jump blues, while Oscar Moore, inspired by Charlie Christian, Benny Goodman's pioneering electric guitarist, had kept the instrument popular in jazz circles with his impeccably swinging solos in the King Cole Trio. In country music, Merle Travis was similarly in the midst of rewriting the rules, transforming the amplified guitar into a stringed equivalent of the pianoforte—an instrument capable of producing melodies as well as harmonies, with more or less percussive force, at a volume that could compete with brass, woodwinds, and drums. Grasping all of these possibilities and elaborating them still further by building his own solid-body electric guitar was Les Paul, who released his first recordings several years before Leo Fender brought the Esquire to market.

Unlike Les Paul, who was an able musician in his own right, Leo Fender was fascinated, above all, by the sheer romance of electronics. He represents a recurrent type in postwar culture: the technological tinkerer as Promethean innovator.

Just as the introduction of the microphone in the 1920s had revolutionized the practice of popular singing, so did the amplification of the guitar transform the craft of popular musicianship. In both cases technological innovations facilitated the cross-fertilization of new vernacular approaches to music. With the aid of a microphone, singers could address listeners with unprecedented intimacy, just as the jazz style popular in the Twenties encouraged them to phrase with rhythmic flexibility. A similar metamorphosis occurred with the electric guitar: amplification allowed guitarists to play fluid and hornlike solos, while the country and jump blues genres popular in the late Forties encouraged them to elaborate a more percussive and riffing style.

In 1948, there was an outpouring of guitar boogie records. John Lee Hooker offered "Boogie Chillen," playing a primal style—one

people who would be able to make music. The guitar has long been an inviting instrument for amateurs: easily portable, it is also relatively easy to play. But Fender's innovations made it even easier. By doing away with the hollow, resonating cavity of wood that was the musical heart of the old-fashioned Spanish guitar, Fender's solid-body design sharply reduced the importance of controlling each string's resonance precisely, enabling players to mask fingering mistakes. Suddenly even a clumsy novice could sound almost musical: plug in a Telecaster, tap a string, and sound poured effortlessly out, at a volume that was previously unimaginable.

Fender's guitar inaugurated a new era for the design and manufacture of electronic instruments. Fender himself worked on the first electric pianos, which his company produced in the mid-Sixties. A generation later, with the use of computers in synthesizers, drum machines, and sequencers—devices able to store and program patterns of sound electronically—a variety of sophisticated electronic instruments had all but obviated the need for a musician to acquire, through practice, a certain level of manual dexterity. On a modern electronic synthesizer, one need only touch a button or a key, and samples of every conceivable sort of timbre and sound pour forth effortlessly. Whether this superficial ease of access to the means of producing sound has brought the world more music of beauty is, of course, another question entirely.

"Let's be realistic about this," Frank Zappa remarked in 1979, usefully summing up Leo Fender's contribution to global culture. "The guitar can be the single most blasphemous device on the face of the earth." Powerful, flashy, unspeakably loud, a handy tool for those with little in the way of previous musical experience, the electric guitar became the archetypal weapon in rock's attack on the decorum and orderliness of previous forms of fine music, profaning its empire of well-tempered tones and refined artistry, and allowing a new spirit—of deliberate musical brutishness—to ring in listeners' ears.

blaring chord, banged out at a boogie tempo. Arthur Smith sounded jaunty and crisp on his influential "Guitar Boogie," a hit with country fans later that year. And then there was Les Paul, whose tongue-in-cheek "Hip-Billy Boogie" was characteristically clever, setting bright riffs in cheerful counterpoint to a bluesy solo, thanks to Paul's pioneering use of sound-on-sound tape recording, or overdubbing.

The guitars that Leo Fender introduced in 1950 proved to be the right product at the right time. The instrument's construction was sturdy, yet elegant. A neck of solid maple was bolted to a gently curved body of flat, solid ash. Two pickups were mounted in the body, one of them angled next to the bridge, to produce the crispest possible treble tones. The headstock, gently curved like the instrument's body, announced in spaghetti lettering that this was a guitar made by Fender.

The new instrument—first dubbed the Esquire, then the Broadcaster, and finally the Telecaster—caught on quickly. By 1951, business was booming—and Fender was putting into production his next major invention, the electric bass.

Musicians were drawn to the Telecaster by its rugged construction and the unusual palette of sounds it could produce. Mute the strings and the notes popped percussively; raise the volume and the notes hung in the air, as if by magic defying the quick decay of the naturally plucked string. Using the pickup nearest to the bridge produced a sound that was preternaturally bright and twangy, while using the pickup nearest the neck created a mellower tone, reminiscent of that produced by previous electric guitars.

But Fender was more than a skilled instrument maker. He has also rightly been hailed as the electric guitar's Harley Earl—an engineer with a flair for futuristic design. Like Earl's famous tailfin designs for General Motors cars in the 1950s, Fender's guitars flaunted the artificiality of their shape, using swept-back contours to evoke a fantasy of power and speed. Fender's Stratocaster model, introduced in 1954, was offered in a host of shocking colors, from Fiesta Red to Shoreline Gold. Unlike the saxophones and trumpets played by a big band musician, or even the synthesizers and electronic keyboards fashionable today, these were instruments that made a fashion statement. Musicians sported them like necklaces, waved them like scarves, collected them like rare pearls.

Fender's instruments did more than change the sound and look of postwar pop music; above all, they changed the range and variety of