

Rock and Roll and Social Class in the South

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“Rock and roll” describes the fusion of rhythm-and-blues, country, and gospel music that emerged from the South in the mid-1950s. Performed by artists such as Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Buddy Holly, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Bill Haley and the Comets, the new music swept the country from 1955 until the early 1960s. Other than Haley, these artists hailed from working class southern backgrounds and drew on vernacular musical styles associated with white and black southern working class cultures. Because of its working-class, multi-racial origins and its emergence at a time of great social, cultural, and economic change in the South, rock and roll quickly became a polarizing cultural force with which all southern social classes were compelled to engage.

The southern white working class generally interacted with African Americans more than other social classes did in the Jim Crow South, and the young white men that became the first rockers grew up absorbing black music from live encounters, radio, and records. Beyond drawing on black music, early rockers also imitated the clothing, slang, dance, and hairstyles of the black working class, much to the chagrin of the white southern middle class. Besides performers, other architects of rock and roll such as Sam Phillips (owner of Memphis’ Sun Records), also of southern working class origins, drew on those working-class roots in crafting the rock and roll sound and ethos. The southern white bourgeoisie accurately perceived that the new rock and roll symbolized not just a musical genre, but an entire lifestyle and set of aesthetic, cultural, and social values derived in great measure from the southern black working class.

Although the performers and producers of rock and roll were almost exclusively associated with the southern working class, the class demographics of the genre’s consumers were considerably more complicated. Many white and black working class and middle class southern teens and college students enthusiastically supported rock and roll by purchasing records, attending concerts, and listening to it on the radio. However, class-based audience preferences still existed within this continuum of fandom. One sociological study found that middle or upper-class teens were more drawn to the music of Pat Boone, while working class teens were fans of Elvis Presley. Boone, a white rock and roll artist from Florida, performed sanitized versions of vibrant recordings by other rock and roll and rhythm and blues artists. His image was conspicuously defined by his clean-cut hairstyle, college education, early marriage, and conservative clothing. Boone was marketed to the middle class as a socially-sanctioned alternative to the gyrating, heavily rhythmic, rebellious rock and roll artists such as Presley.

Challenges to rock and roll in the South came, predictably, from the white and black middle classes, which perceived an alarming threat to social norms embodied in the music and style of the southern working class rockers. Educators, writers, politicians, and ministers delivered sermons and wrote articles describing the genre as “tribal,” “primitive,” and of “jungle” origins. Playing on the worst fears of mid-century white Southerners, segregationist organizations even charged that consumption of rock and roll led inexorably to miscegenation. Middle-class criticism of rock and roll in the mid- and late 1950s echoed similar class-based objections to the risqué lyrics and infectious rhythms of rhythm and blues just a few years earlier.

The initial dominance of the artists and musical styles of the working-class South in the nation’s rock and roll scene was ended in the early 1960s by the Beatles’ spreading fame and the stylistic diversification of rock music. A decade later, however, southern working-class rock

artists once again emerged as a potent artistic force under the rubric of “southern rock.” Avoiding the banal dance, love, and party-themed lyrics that characterized 1950s rock and roll, these southern rockers articulated the sentiments of the post-integration southern white working class—a demographic increasingly marginalized from mainstream American culture and progress. The stance outlined in their songs, most famously in Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Sweet Home Alabama,” valorized white rural southern masculine identity and conservative social values, emphasized the difficulty of preserving a traditional southern way of life in a postmodern world, aligned the artists with blue-collar workers, celebrated hard living, and employed Confederate and Christian iconography in an effort to project a working-class southern identity. Whether through musical gestures or lyrical content associated with black and white southern working classes, the class-based iconoclasm of rock and roll and southern rock artists, targeting bourgeoisie social values, constitutes a vibrant cultural thread in the fabric of American popular music history.

Bibliography

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