

Syllabus for ROCK'N'ROLL'S FIRST DECADE

Fromm Institute

8 Tuesdays, 1pm-2:40pm

May 4-June 22

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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. Elvis Presley mixes country with rhythm and blues on his first five singles for Sun Records in 1954 and 1955, establishing the first major white rock'n'roll style, rockabilly.

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-1950s

A. African-American rock'n'rollers cross over from the black audience to the white pop one, including Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Fats Domino, as well as vocal doo-wop harmony groups like the Platters.

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

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 Diversifies in the Mid-1950s

A. Rock vocal groups, sometimes retrospectively called doo-wop groups, proliferate. Many, like the Coasters, are African-American; some are white, and often Italian-American, like Danny & the Juniors. One is even integrated (the Del-Vikings).

B. Some of the original rock greats, like Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry, continue to churn out huge classic hits as the mid-1950s pass into the late 1950s. But there's a backlash against rock's supposedly corrupting influence among some authority figures.

Other themes: Prejudice stokes anti-rock sentiments, especially in the South; lyrics become increasingly directed toward the teenage experience, particularly in the compositions of Chuck Berry and the Mike Leiber-Jerry Stoller songwriting team.

Week Five: 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.

Other themes: The rise of rock- and teenage-oriented radio; the payola scandal, which damages the careers of many early rock'n'roll radio DJs.

Week Six: Rock in the Early 1960s: Teen Idols and Instrumental Rock

A. 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.

B. Rock rediscovers tougher guitar-oriented sounds with a proliferation of instrumental groups. Key artists: the Ventures, Link Wray.

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 Seven: Rock in the Early 1960s: Surf Music and the Girl Groups

A. In southern California, guitar-oriented groups create instrumentals reflecting the new surf sport and the ocean. Vocal groups add singing to the style to achieve huge success. Key artists: Dick Dale, the Beach Boys, Jan & Dean.

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: growing influence of publishers and their young songwriter-producers; Hollywood becomes an increasingly powerful base of record labels and production.

Week Eight: Rock Approaches the Mid-1960s: The Birth of Soul and the First Hints of a 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 themes: the beginnings of new important studios and labels in Los Angeles, Memphis, and Detroit; a whole new generation of young musicians comes of age in the UK to set the groundwork for the British Invasion.