

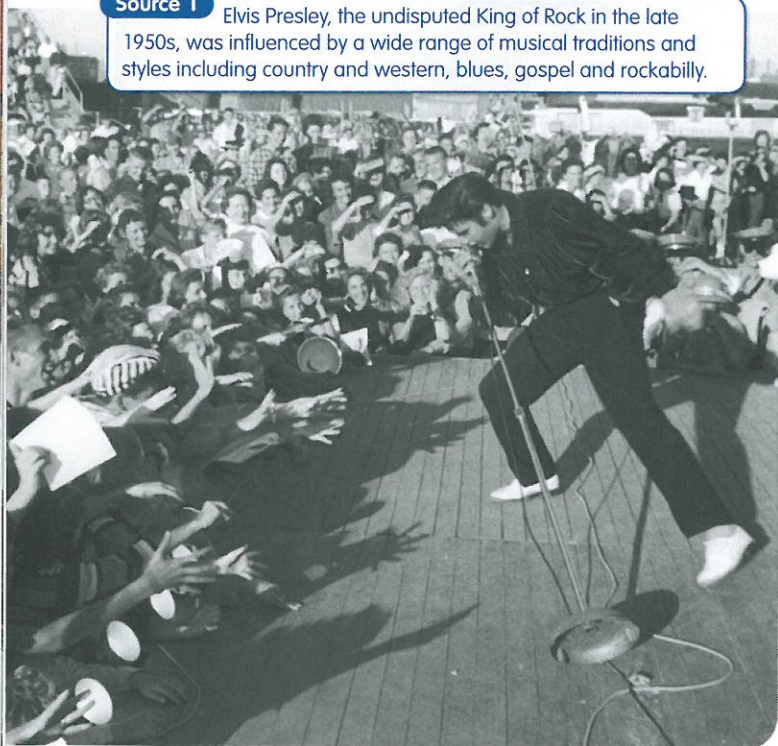
5.5 The rock'n'roll revolution

Australian popular music of the 1940s and 1950s consisted of jazz, country and big band music, and reflected the mostly conservative tastes of its listeners. Major stars of the day included the crooners Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra. Radio stations in this era did not specialise in styles, but played a range of popular songs, usually as part of programs that focused on a particular musical genre. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, teenagers were looking for a sound that was riskier and more 'authentic' than the music their parents were listening to. They found it in rock'n'roll, which was broadcast on radio and television, and promoted through live rock'n'roll shows featuring the best artists from overseas.

The origins of rock'n'roll

Rock'n'roll began in America and blended country and western music with the beat of rhythm and blues and the vocal power of African American gospel music. Another influence on rock'n'roll was rockabilly, white music with a fast, spare style. Rockabilly Carl Perkins' 'Blue suede shoes' (1955) was the first song from Sun Records to sell one million copies and would later become a huge hit for Elvis Presley.

Source 1 Elvis Presley, the undisputed King of Rock in the late 1950s, was influenced by a wide range of musical traditions and styles including country and western, blues, gospel and rockabilly.



Australian rock'n'roll — the first wave

In Australia, rock'n'roll found fans in **disc jockeys** such as Bob Rogers. Previously, Rogers had achieved some fame by discovering the song 'Pub with no beer' by Australian country and western artist Slim Dusty. Now Rogers would present the first top 40 show in Australia, bringing Australian teenagers the new sounds coming out of America on his weekly radio show.

Australian teenagers had been enthralled with rock'n'roll since the movie *Blackboard Jungle* hit theatres in 1955; its soundtrack featured 'Rock around the clock' by Bill Haley. Before this, most music hits would sell around 50 000 copies in Australia. 'Rock around the clock' sold three times as many copies. For Australian teenagers, rock'n'roll represented new-found freedom and an opportunity to break away from what they saw as the old-fashioned values of their parents. This realignment of values meant more than choosing one music style over another. In the post-war era, England was still repairing cities bombed by Nazi Germany, while America had emerged from World War II triumphant and wealthy. For many young people, England represented the past and America the future.

Source 2 Australian singer Lonnie Lee, who would go on to have a string of number 1 hits of his own, recalls the effect that *Blackboard Jungle* had on him when he watched it for the first time.

I can remember walking down George Street with a couple of my friends to go and see it and it was really exciting. I was — I think I was about 16 or 17 and we went into the movie and the music came on and oh, mercy, I swear you could not put it into words the incredible effect that that music had on young people knowing myself how I felt and my friends felt. And the people were thumping on the floor with their feet to the beat of the thing and clapping and yelling, it was like a live performance.

Rock'n'roll was featured across Australia in live shows organised by promoters such as Lee Gordon. Through his 'Big Show' concerts, Gordon brought a number of major rock'n'roll acts to Australia, including Bill Haley and the Comets, Little Richard, and Buddy Holly and the Crickets, and allowed Australian acts to open for them, thereby promoting the local music scene. It was on one of these tours that audiences were introduced to an Australian singer named Johnny O'Keefe (known as 'The Wild One').

O'Keefe, who had modelled himself on Elvis Presley and Little Richard, became the first Australian rock'n'roll

Source 3 For three years beginning in 1959, the ABC broadcast *Six O'clock Rock*, using Australia's first rock'n'roll star Johnny O'Keefe to promote the music and dance of a new generation. This is a photograph of Australian singer Lonnie Lee performing on the show.



performer to tour the United States and to break into the United States top 40. Television would also play a major role in popularising early rock'n'roll, as television shows such as *Six O'clock Rock*, hosted by O'Keefe, presented rock'n'roll to a predominantly teenage audience.

As the 1950s drew to a close, the American rock'n'roll performers were about to face a challenge from British rock'n'roll bands including the Rolling Stones, the Animals, and, of course, the Beatles. Together, these bands would come to be known as 'The British Invasion'.

The rise of the Beatles

The working-class English city of Liverpool was a grim place to grow up in the post-war years. Local teenagers were looking for a creative outlet. Many found it in music. Four of the best were John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr, the Beatles. After being turned down by all the major record labels in London, the Beatles were finally signed to Parlophone Records, which had previously published classical, jazz and comedy albums. Their first single, 'Love me do', was released in

October 1962 and peaked at number 17 on the British charts. In March the following year they made it to number 1 with a song they wrote themselves, 'Please please me'. This would be the first of many hits in the singles and album charts.

Beatlemania touches down in Australia

Following a meteoric rise to fame in England and a string of number one hits in the United States, the Beatles set off on a tour of Australia known as Beatlemania. When their plane touched down at Sydney's Mascot International Airport on 11 June 1964, the Fab Four (as the Beatles

Did you know?



When the Beatles toured Australia, the DJs hosting the events failed to stop the fans from screaming through the performance, making it almost impossible to hear the music.