

# FROM RADIO AND 'THE FLICKS' TO ROCK 'N' ROLL AND TELEVISION

## GOLDEN AGE OF RADIO

The late 1940s and early 1950s were part of the golden age of radio in Australia. Television had not yet been introduced, so radio was the main form of home entertainment that became an important outlet for popular culture. In 1955, 97 per cent of households had at least one radio that families would gather around in the evenings to listen to the daily news, music, popular game shows, drama serials, comedies or children's shows. There were approximately 130 government-funded radio stations and a similar number of locally based commercial stations; by 1948, the regulatory authority decided that there was no room for extra stations. With no competition from television, the radio industry flourished financially. Household brands sponsored shows as a way of advertising their products.



SOURCE 4.3.1 A group of young friends relaxing at Bondi Beach in Sydney, 1948

Q How does this source indicate the influence of radio on popular culture in the late 1940s and early 1950s?

Most radio shows were made in Australia. They were often performed live with audiences and in conjunction with other activities, such as dances at venues like the Trocadero in Sydney. Popular shows included *ABC Hit Parade*, *When a Girl Marries*, *Bob Dyer's Dude Ranch*, *The Wilfrid Thomas Show*, *Dad and Dave* and *The Village Glee Club*. Arguably, the most famous radio presenter during this period was Jack Davey whose catchcry opening 'Hi ho,

everybody' for variety and quiz-style shows became very popular. Some early Australian television stars such as Bert Newton and Graham Kennedy began their careers in radio.

Although most content was uniquely Australian, when US rock 'n' roll music began to dominate the music charts, some presenters started using American accents to seem more modern. Some argue that this was the beginning of Australia's 'cultural cringe'. The term 'cultural cringe' referred to the way many Australians began to reject distinctly Australian culture in favour of cultural influences from other countries, such as Britain or the United States.

## GOING TO 'THE FLICKS'

In the period after World War II, the Australian film industry became swamped by Hollywood, where high-quality films were being made using new technology such as technicolor. Their big budgets for advertising and promotional campaigns meant that other film companies could not compete in the industry. As early as 1952, 74 per cent of films imported into Australia came from the United States and another 18 per cent originated from Britain. Such overseas influence on the Australian public during their leisure time was a sign of the impact of foreign television in the years to come. Although there was some drop-off in cinema attendance rates after the introduction of television in 1956, young people in particular still went to the movies in large numbers. The trends, fashions, products and attitudes portrayed to Australian youth were literally larger than life on the big screen.

Some of the more popular films of the 1950s, such as *The Wild One* (1953) starring Marlon Brando, and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) with James Dean, portrayed rebellious youth questioning their place in society and challenging the conservative rules and values of the time. Many adults were worried about the influence these films might have on young people. Other films, however, such as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) with Marilyn Monroe, or *Pillow Talk* (1959) starring Doris Day and Rock Hudson, were romantic comedies that adults felt more comfortable with teenagers viewing.

In whichever style of film, actors and actresses were the stars that young people attempted to imitate in their clothing, hairstyles and behaviours, with businesses and advertisers ever ready to take advantage of their influence.



## JAMES DEAN

The overnight sensation of 'East of Eden'

Warner Bros. put all the force of the screen into a challenging drama of today's juvenile violence!

## 'REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE'

CINEMASCOPE  
...WARNERCOLOR



SOURCE 4.3.2 Poster advertising the film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955)

- Q 1 What aspects of the images on this poster might be a concern to parents of teenagers in the 1950s? Explain your answer.
- 2 What aspects of this poster might be appealing to teenagers in the 1950s? Explain your answer.

## 'THIS IS TELEVISION'

Black and white television became available in Australia in 1956. The first program, a news broadcast, went to air on 16 September out of Sydney, less than two months before the Olympics began in Melbourne. It was introduced by Bruce Gyngell and read by an American, Chuck Faulkner. The US presence on Australian television from the outset was an indication of the impact that programs made in the United States would have on this growing industry and in turn on Australian popular culture.

The average wage in 1956 was £15 a week, so televisions were quite expensive at £300 each. Families who purchased one would often find their neighbours visiting in the evening to watch the latest programs. It was also compulsory to purchase a licence for £5 to own a television in this early period. Despite the cost, by 1960, there were over 1 million licences sold across Australia; over 50 per cent of homes in Sydney had a television, and every capital

city apart from Hobart had a television service. Radio was quickly surpassed as people's favourite form of home entertainment and adjusted its programming to mostly music. In 1959, 15 year olds were watching 9–12 hours of television a week, which was more than any other recreational activity.

Although Australian programs were produced such as *In Melbourne Tonight* (1957–70), *Pick a Box* (1957–71), *Bandstand* (1958–72), *Six O'Clock Rock* (1959–62) and *World of Sport* (1959–87), imported US programs

such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–57), *Perry Mason* (1957–66) and *77 Sunset Strip* (1958–64) proved to be very popular and started to dominate viewing. Teenagers began to prefer US products, food, clothing, hairstyles and music, and adopted the interests and slang of the television stars. The attitudes and values of young people also began to be influenced by television programs such as *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–63), which portrayed an idyllic US family lifestyle that bore little resemblance to the reality of most young Australians' lives. Advertisers seized upon the popularity of television with young people and targeted this relatively affluent audience with new products and fashions. The **youth culture** of the baby boomer generation, although frowned upon by elders, rapidly took hold and became part of the Australian way of life.

## ROCK 'N' ROLL

Rock 'n' roll music burst onto the cultural landscape in Australia in 1955 with the release of the film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), which featured the hit song 'Rock Around the Clock' by Bill Haley and His Comets. Although not the first song that could be called **rock 'n' roll**—a fusion of country and western music with African-American rhythm and blues—it signalled a significant shift in the type of music and performers the young baby boomer generation was interested in. With simple, repetitive and often rebellious lyrics, sung by performers with unconventional clothing, hairstyles and dance moves, rock 'n' roll was criticised by many of the older generation as offensive and sexually suggestive. Nevertheless, it defined popular culture during the 1950s and early 1960s. Bill Haley and His Comets performed to huge crowds in their 1957 tour of Australia and the film *Rock Around the Clock* (1956) introduced Australian teenagers to other rock 'n' roll performers.



SOURCE 4.3.3 Publicity photograph of the Cleavers, the starring family of the *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–63) television series, around 1957