

The combination of radio, film and television ensured that the influence of rock 'n' roll culture spread rapidly. The arrival on the music scene of the young Elvis Presley in 1956 ensured its popularity, with young girls becoming infatuated with him and young men wanting to be like him. So controversial was Elvis that when appearing on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948–71) in 1957 he was filmed from the waist up so that the audience could not see his gyrating hip movements, popularising his nickname 'Elvis the Pelvis'. Apart from television appearances and his many hit songs including 'Heartbreak Hotel', 'Love Me Tender' and 'Jailhouse Rock', Elvis also appeared in thirty-three films, taking full advantage of the **mass media** of the period. Young people adopted the new dance styles seen in Hollywood films and television that were mostly based on versions of swing, jive and a style from the 1940s called 'bopping'. Fad dances such as the 'Hand Jive', 'The Stroll' and eventually, in 1960, Chubby Checker's 'The Twist' were also enjoyed by teenagers.

Australian performers embraced rock 'n' roll with many local stars emerging. The most well known was Johnny O'Keefe who shot to stardom as a support act for the 1957 tour of Bill Haley and His Comets. O'Keefe's nickname, 'The Wild One', was taken from the title of his first hit album and was reinforced through his energetic performances. He eventually hosted the television program *Six O'Clock Rock*, and along with other Australian programs such as Brian



Henderson's *Bandstand*, promoted Australian performers. Entertainers Col Joye and the Joy Boys and Johnny Rebb were portrayed as being more gentlemanly than US stars such as Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard. A popular tour by US evangelist Billy Graham in 1959 that preached traditional family values signalled that perhaps not all Australians were hooked on the rock 'n' roll lifestyle.

BODGIES AND WIDGIES

Youth 'gangs' have existed in Australian cities since the 1800s. Loud and offensive gangs that challenged, harassed and threatened the general public were referred to collectively as larrikins. In the 1950s, groups of young men who adopted the 'sharp' trends and fashions of the era became known as **bodgies**, and their female counterparts were referred to as **widgies**.

The first bodgies were ex-World War II Australian sailors who impersonated Americans in the late 1940s while running a black market. The 'Woolloomooloo Yanks' regularly visited milk bars in Kings Cross, Sydney, and gained the admiration of others. As the 1950s progressed, the United States influenced Australian popular culture more and more. Groups of young people adopted the rock 'n' roll image after 1956, particularly in inner city areas. Newspapers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* asserted that by copying US styles, bodgies and widgies achieved an instant status that may have otherwise been unattainable.

There were significant variances in bodgie dress, from leather jackets, denim jeans, studded belts and boots, to drape suits with pegged trousers and moccasins or pointed-toe winklepicker shoes. Hair was styled to look like a duck tail with hair grease. Widgies cut their hair short and wore a range of fashions from tight black skirts with a slit at the back and loose three-quarter sleeve shirts, to tight black pants or jeans rolled up at the bottom.

Bodgies and widgies became associated with youth violence and lawlessness. Brawls at dance halls between bodgies and rival groups of young men were commonly reported in the media, as was harassing and bashing of young migrant men, and stories of razor attacks and sexual harassment of young women. Some were involved in general nuisance behaviour, such as dancing in the streets, disrupting traffic and challenging police officers, or playing 'chicken' on railways, roads and harbours. They became unpopular with a generally conservative Australian public who expected young people to be at school, work, home, playing sport, or participating in church-run dances. Although there certainly was some misbehaviour, today it is generally accepted that a lot of the hysteria surrounding the violence associated with bodgies and widgies was due to sensationalist newspaper headlines, and that many teenagers did little but wear the fashions of the time.

SOURCE 4.3.4 Johnny O'Keefe performing at the Brisbane Boxing Stadium, Queensland in 1963. Held at the National Library of Australia

Bodgie delinquency began featuring in the Australian press in the early 1950s with the Melbourne Herald reporting upon a St Kilda Police 'declaration of war' against a local bodgie gang in December 1951... and in November 1952, the Melbourne Sun relating that about 200 bodgies and widgies had clashed with police in a Swanston Street milk bar... Reports of the bodgies' criminal behaviour continued. In [NSW] in September 1954, a court convicted a bodgie of housebreaking... in Brisbane in February 1955, bodgie gangs fought in the city's streets... and in South Australia in April 1955, police and magistrates declared their intention to stamp out bodgie gangs... In the same month, Melbourne police prematurely declared that the bodgie 'cult' was 'dead'... only to have a Melbourne police officer estimate in June 1956 that more than 1000 youths were members of the city's bodgie gangs, with additional gangs operating in Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo...

SOURCE 4.3.5 From Dr K. Moore, 'Bodgies, widgies and moral panic in Australia 1955–59', Centre for Social Change Research, Queensland University of Technology, 29 October 2004

- Q** 1 What does Source 4.3.5 indicate about how widespread bodgie gangs were in the 1950s?
2 How useful is this type of source to a historian studying youth culture in the 1950s?



SOURCE 4.3.6 Australian teenagers dancing to rock 'n' roll music in Sydney, 1957

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Remembering and understanding

- Define the terms below.
 - bodgies
 - bopping
 - cultural cringe
 - mass media
 - rock 'n' roll
 - youth culture
 - widgies
- Why was radio able to flourish in Australia before 1956? Where was most of the content on Australian radio produced during this period?
- Construct a mind map with the central heading 'Influences on popular culture in Australia'. Allow a full page in your workbook and add the sub-headings of 'Radio', 'Television', 'Film' and 'US influences'. Complete the mind map by adding details relevant to each of these headings.
- What other explanation, apart from simply following trends, is given for the emergence of bodgies and widgies in the 1950s?

Analysing and evaluating

- Explain why bodgies and widgies became the stereotype for large groups of teenagers during the 1950s. Is this an accurate representation of all teenagers of the time?
- What forms of mass media do you think have the largest influence on youth culture today? Explain your answer.
- Explain whether it is fair to say that modern-day Australia is influenced by 'cultural cringe'.

Creating

- Using the information in this unit, draw a cartoon that illustrates the impact of rock 'n' roll on popular culture during the 1950s and early 1960s.
- In pairs or small groups, conduct an internet search to find out about the slang and language of teenagers in the 1950s.
 - Together, write a script for an interview with a teenager of the 1950s about their interests and role models, with a view to obtaining a snapshot of popular culture at this time. You should include questions that cover a broad range of aspects of popular culture, and detailed answers from the teenager in language they would have typically used.
 - Perform your interview for the class.