



DION AND THE TEEN IDOLS

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What role did the so-called “teen idols” of the late 1950s play in bringing Rock and Roll into mainstream American culture?

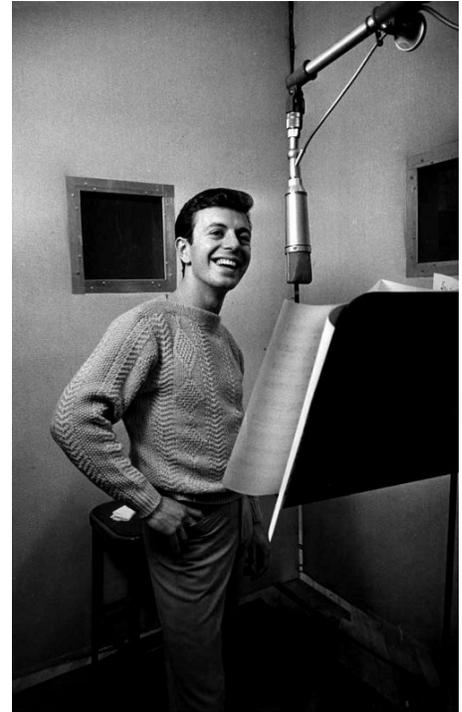
OVERVIEW

Rock and Roll evolved from Rhythm and Blues, a sound developed by African-American musicians that by the early 1950s had begun to reach a new audience among young white teenagers. By nature of its association with black America, there were those who feared that Rock and Roll was a corrupting influence on American youth, promoting socializing between races and juvenile delinquency.

Music was not the only thing that disturbed those concerned about Rock and Roll’s influence. Films such as *The Wild One* (1953), featuring Marlon Brando as the leader of a motorcycle gang, seemed to suggest that teenagers, if not given proper guidance, might fall in with the “wrong kind of crowd.” In an attempt to encourage “good citizenship,” Parent-Teacher Associations and superintendents across the country created codes of conduct for their pupils to monitor school attire, curfew hours, and social behavior both on and off campus. Rock and Roll, and the culture around it, were viewed as something to control.

Concurrently, pioneer jockey Alan Freed, the man who first attached the term “Rock and Roll” to the latest R&B recordings, was encountering troubles of his own. In August 1957, Freed’s ABC teen dance show *Big Beat* was cancelled after African-American artist Frankie Lymon was seen dancing with a white girl on the program, an image that outraged the network’s southern affiliates. Less than a year later, at the Boston date of his *Big Beat* Spring 1958 tour, Freed was charged with anarchy and inciting the youths in attendance to riot, though the charges were later dropped.

While Freed battled accusations of encouraging miscegenation and delinquent behavior, many of the early Rock and Roll stars coincidentally began to disappear from the charts. Between 1957 and 1960, Little Richard gave up secular music for a life in the ministry, Elvis Presley enlisted in the Army, and scandals disrupted the careers of both Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry. The absence of these original crossover artists created a vacuum that made room for a new class of performers—the so-called “teen idols”—who were positioned to broaden the Rock and Roll audience while also alleviating anxieties about the music’s potential to corrupt youth.



OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

The idols—mainly white, mainly male—performed a version of Rock and Roll that was in sync with the mainstream American culture of the day. Unlike the characters portrayed in *The Wild One*, artists including Dion, Frankie Avalon, and Annette Funicello sported a neat, non-threatening appearance, often singing in a Pop style associated as much with Frank Sinatra as it was with Elvis Presley. Their clean-cut good looks meant that they would play well on television, which was rapidly replacing the radio as the main source of family entertainment.

The teen idols were sometimes welcome in markets where more controversial performers like Little Richard or Jerry Lee Lewis were not. While many of the idols would never break free of their nonthreatening images, performers including Dion and Ricky Nelson eventually pushed against the boundaries of their early public personas as their careers matured, with varying degrees of success.

In this lesson, students will examine the emergence of the teen idols in the late 1950s—with a particular focus on Dion and the Belmonts—to understand how mainstream culture promoted the image of the “good citizen” teen during an era of increased anxiety surrounding youth culture. Students will listen to recordings of Dion and the Belmonts’ “A Teenager in Love,” as well as Dion’s later recording “The Wanderer,” in addition to viewing a 1958 instructional film outlining school dress codes, a 1953 trailer for *The Wild One*, a selection of teen magazines, and performances by Jerry Lee Lewis and Connie Francis.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- How the teen idols of the late 1950s provided a bridge from the raw sounds and flamboyant styles of the early Rock and Roll pioneers to the more “reserved” Pop tastes of mainstream America
- Media that adult authority figures employed to dissuade rebelliousness and help guide teenage behavior, including educational films and teen magazines
- How Dion initially embraced the “teen idol” marketing strategy but departed from it with recordings like “The Wanderer”

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Common Core: Students will analyze images and videos and answer questions to evaluate the role and influence of teen idols (CCSS Reading 7; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2)
- Common Core: Students will write a persuasive magazine article promoting Dion to an audience of teenagers in the 1950s, choosing details collected from recordings, text resources, and video interviews (CCSS Writing 3)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Play video clip of Jerry Lee Lewis performing “Whole Lotta Shakin’” (1957). Ask students: how would you describe the performance? Students should list on a piece of notebook paper words and phrases that describe the song and Lewis’ performing style.
2. Next, play video clip of Connie Francis singing “Little Blue Wren” (1956). *On the same paper as before, ask students to write down words and phrases that describe the song and the performance style. Discuss as a class: stylistically, how are these two singers different from one another?

By show of hands, take a class poll: Between Jerry Lee Lewis and Connie Francis, which singer would you guess was considered a “teen idol” in the late 1950s, based on the quality and presentation of their music? Ask volunteers of differing opinions to explain their reasoning.

*The “Little Blue Wren” clip features teen actress Tuesday Weld lip-synching to Connie Francis’ vocal. Teacher may wish to point out the image of Connie Francis on Handout 1, included later in the lesson.

PROCEDURE:

1. Distribute Handout 1: Teen Idols of the Late 1950s. As a class, read the summary about the emergence of the idols. Allow students a few minutes to analyze the images of teen magazine covers on the handout.

Discuss as a class:

- How would you describe these “idols”? What do they have in common? How are they different from the image of Little Richard at the top of the handout?
- What characteristics do you think made them popular and acceptable in the late 1950s?
- What evidence can you find on these magazine covers of other ways the idols were marketed? What does this suggest about the popularity of the idols?
- Who are some examples of contemporary celebrities who might be classified as “teen idols?” List a few responses on the board.

2. Play clip of Hicksville, NY Junior High School Dress Code (1958). Discuss as a class:

- Who in this film is responsible for deciding what is permissible behavior and dress for school? What do you think is the reasoning behind their position?
- What specifically does the film consider to be “bad taste in school attire and behavior”?
- Refer back to the image of Dion, one of the performers included on Handout 1. If you were a superintendent of a school district in the 1950s and you were instituting a dress code, what might be your position on a student styled like Dion?

3. Play trailer for *The Wild One* (1953). Ask students to take note of how the characters are dressed and how they behave. Explain that in the years following this film’s release, its images of outlaw

motorcycle culture became widely popular and iconic in the United States. However, the film was also considered controversial, so much so that it was banned in Britain for 14 years and was not shown in that country until 1968. Discuss as a class:

- How are the men and women in this film dressed? How do the characters behave? What similarities do you notice between the way these characters are dressed and the “innappropriate” fashions from the dress code film?
- Why do you think this movie was considered controversial by some audiences? Why might parents have objected to their teens seeing this film?
- How do the characters in this film compare to the images of the teen idols on the magazine covers?

4. Distribute Handout 2: Dion and the Belmonts. Read aloud as a class, alternating paragraphs.

5. Play audio clip of “A Teenager in Love” (1959). As a class, listen while reading along with the lyrics on the handout, taking notes on any key themes or phrases. Ask students: what is the mood of the song? Why might this song appeal particularly to teenagers? As a performer, does Dion seem to fit the teen idol mold?

6. Play interview with Dion on performing as a teen idol. Discuss as a class:

- How does Dion seem to feel about his former role as a teen idol?
- How does Dion explain the difference between the sound of his original recording of “The Wanderer” and the way he had to perform the same song in a Hollywood movie? What does he believe is the reason why the film studio changed his backing band?
- Why might Dion have ultimately rejected being cast as a teen idol?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Play clip of “The Wanderer” (1961). After viewing, students should use Handout 2 to take notes on any key themes or phrases. Explain that Dion released this song two years after “A Teenager in Love.” Ask students: how is the point-of-view of the singer in “The Wanderer” different from that of the singer of “A Teenager in Love”?

WRITING PROMPT:

Imagine that you are a staff writer for the magazine ‘Teen in 1961. Referring to the materials surveyed in this lesson, write a short article about Dion for the upcoming issue of the magazine. The article should promote the release of “The Wanderer,” discussing the sound and lyrics of the recording and explaining how this song is different from the earlier material Dion released with his backing group the Belmonts (including “Teenager in Love”). Be sure to also explain who might find this song appealing and to whom the song might not appeal.

Have student volunteers share their work-in-progress of the Dion article with the rest of the class. If students are not finished writing, volunteers can read their “lead,” or the leading one or two sentences of the article that set up the essential facts, tone, and opinion of the rest of the article. Teacher may opt to allow students to complete their articles at home and share as a class at a later session.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

1. Pick one of the teen idols of the late 1950s mentioned on Handout 1 and conduct further research into his or her career (excluding Dion, remaining choices include Frankie Avalon, Pat Boone, Fabian, Connie Francis, Annette Funicello, and Ricky Nelson). Write a short essay that answers the following question: Why do you think this artist did not achieve the same level of fame as Elvis Presley, perhaps the definitive icon of American Rock and Roll culture? Be sure to draw specific comparisons between performance styles, clothing, music, and other factors.
2. Write a short essay comparing either Dion’s “A Teenager in Love” or “The Wanderer” with a song by a contemporary teen idol. How do the songs compare in terms of theme, point-of-view, mood, language, historical context, and the public image of the performer? Be sure to address the characteristics of the performances that would both appeal to and/or challenge a mainstream audience in their respective eras.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text

Reading 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

Writing 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Speaking and Listening 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language for Grades 6-12

Language 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Select: Choose music appropriate for a specific purpose or context.

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Connie Francis – Little Blue Wren (1956)
- Jerry Lee Lewis – Whole Lotta Shakin' (1964)
- Hicksville, NY Junior High School Dresscode (1958)
- The Wild One – Trailer (1953)
- Dion – The Wanderer (1963)
- Dion and the Belmonts – A Teenager in Love (1959)
- Dion Dimucci – Performing as a Teen Idol

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Frankie Avalon
- Pat Boone
- Dion
- Connie Francis
- Jerry Lee Lewis
- Rick Nelson

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Teen Idols of the Late 1950s
- Handout 2: Dion and the Belmonts