THE INFLUENCE OF RHYTHM AND BLUES

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What did R&B bring to early Rock and Roll, and how was early Rock and Roll different?

OVERVIEW

All popular music comes from somewhere. But when innovative music gets on the radio, the television, or to the public’s ears and eyes in some other fashion, it often sounds like it appeared from nowhere; like it landed on the doorstep and had no parents. But whether Punk, Hip Hop, Hard Rock or any other music, it all came from somewhere.

So, too, was the case with early Rock and Roll. What Elvis did pre-existed him—even if the way he put it together did not. As this lesson will suggest, one crucial “parent” to early Rock and Roll was Rhythm and Blues, or R&B. As Fats Domino said in the mid-1950s, “What they call Rock and Roll I’ve been playing in New Orleans for years.” Many would agree with him. The subject of this lesson is the music of which Fats Domino speaks: the R&B of the pre-Rock and Roll era.

What was R&B, and where did it come from? The answers to that question are many and certainly crucial for any deeper understanding of the Rock and Roll story. The short version has it that when the Swing bands went out, due in part to the wartime economy and the daunting costs of keeping a large ensemble on the road, smaller combos became popular. Those smaller combos had a sound that many described as more “raw.” Artists like Louis Jordan emerged in this moment, influencing a number of Rock and Rollers, Chuck Berry among them. As the R&B recordings reveal, these smaller combos retained the emphasis on horn sections, but, by virtue of being smaller groups of players, their sound left more musical room for other instruments. That being the time when electric guitar technology was getting more advanced, this meant that when the guitar players got more space, they met it with more volume. Thus the R&B sound edged toward Rock and Roll.

But even if R&B provided early Rock and Roll with many of its constituent elements, it is important to also consider what made them different. In this lesson, students will compare LaVern Baker’s “Tra La La,” an example of R&B, with her contemporary Chuck Berry’s “Maybellene,” an example of early Rock and Roll. By way of conclusion, LaVern Baker’s record label, Atlantic, will be discussed as an example of the independent companies that made R&B for black audiences, only to find that white teenagers were, unexpectedly, their growing audience.
Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. **KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):**
   - The importance of R&B as a musical gateway to the Rock and Roll of the mid-1950s
   - The role of labels like Atlantic Records in circulating R&B to both a black and a white audience
   - Some key differences between R&B and early Rock and Roll

2. **BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):**
   - Extrapolate arguments about music by assessing sound, mood, tone, instrumentation
   - Draw connections among various print, audio and visual texts
   - Write creatively for personal and/or small group expression
   - Compare and contrast texts, arguments and ideas
   - Common Core: Students will work together to closely read a text to determine what the text says and to draw logical inferences; students will cite specific quotes when writing and speaking to support their conclusions (CCSS Reading 1; CCSS Speaking and Listening 1; CCSS Language 6)
   - Common Core: Students will review multiple sources to gain knowledge and make connections (CCSS Speaking and Listening 2); students will either take a position in a music review (CCSS Writing 1) or write a short research paper (CCSS Writing 7)

**MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:**

1. Share the following quote with the students, explaining that the speaker is Ahmet Ertegun, founder of Atlantic Records.

   “We had a little bit of a rough time trying to get our artists to do anything resembling the blues. They were more singers like LaVern Baker and Ruth Brown . . . the [New York City-based] bands we had were composed of players from the big jazz bands and swing orchestras who had become studio musicians. They were not at all like the kind of musicians who were playing the blues in Chicago, like Muddy Waters and Willie Dixon and all those people. When we had these musicians try to play in an authentic blues fashion, it didn’t work. The result, however, was quite intriguing. What emerged was music with a blues feel, but with a particularly Northern, urban influence.”
MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)

2. Ask students to explain what they think Ertegun was after but couldn’t find. Write down their ideas.
   - What kind of music was he looking for?
   - Why do you think he wanted a “Blues” sound?
   - Why couldn’t he find it in New York City?
   - What could he find?
   - What kind of musicians specifically was Ertegun able to find to play on records?

3. Ask the students if they know of the Blues musicians Ertegun refers to.

   Ask them the following:
   - How would you describe the sound of Muddy Waters’ music?
   - What do you think Ahmet Ertegun liked about Muddy Waters’ music?
   - And what, again, were the reasons Ertegun said he couldn’t record music like Muddy Waters’ in New York City?

5. Once the class has discussed those questions, turn to the music Ertegun did record.

PROCEDURE:

1. Have the class watch, as a group, the clip of LaVern Baker performing “Tra La La.”

2. Once they have watched, ask them to keep this and Muddy Waters in their minds, and split them into groups of three.

3. Have each group write down, first, the instrumentation they see and hear in each song, and, second, a list of adjectives that describe Baker’s song and performance, and then Waters’.

4. Ask them to consider differences in vocal style, in the sounds of the instruments (sweet or rough?), in the performance styles of the singers, and in the overall moods of the songs.

5. When they have had five minutes to complete this, ask each group to have a representative read the results.

6. Ask the students:
   - Why do you think Ertegun’s recording of LaVern Baker ended up sounding “sweeter” than the music of Muddy Waters, which Ertegun said he originally hoped to capture?
   - What in Ertegun’s statement above provides a clue to this question?

7. To the instructor: Help the class to consider Ertegun’s statement above that “the bands we had [in the studio] were composed of players from the big jazz
bands and swing orchestras who had become studio musicians. They were not at all like the kind of musicians who were playing the blues in Chicago, like Muddy Waters and Willie Dixon and all those people. When we had these musicians try to play in an authentic blues fashion, it didn’t work.”

8. Specifically, point to Ertegun’s comment that the musicians recording with him were from “big jazz bands and swing orchestras.” Very different from Muddy Waters, who grew up on a plantation in Mississippi, the musicians from the Swing bands often had some kind of formal training, could read music, and had adhered to strict codes both of performance etiquette and musician etiquette. The two cultures from which Waters came and from which Ertegun’s studio players came were dramatically different, as were the sounds they produced. Ertegun, obviously, was more drawn to the culture associated with Waters, but he created something “new” when he tried for a Blues sound using musicians associated with Swing and Big Band Jazz. Be sure your students grasp what elements came together to make Atlantic’s R&B sound.

9. Next, ask the students if they have any sense for how the R&B of LaVern Baker is different from early Rock and Roll.

• What do you know about early Rock and Roll?

• What performers do you associate with early Rock and Roll?

• What instruments are featured in early Rock and Roll?

• Do you think LaVern Baker qualifies as Rock and Roll?

10. Replay a minute of the LaVern Baker clip before turning to Chuck Berry’s “Maybellene.”

11. Have the class go back into their groups, creating another two lists of adjectives to describe the differences between Chuck Berry and LaVern Baker.

12. When each group is finished, ask them to share their lists with the class.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

1. Have the class discuss the following question:

• Why might Ahmet Ertegun have liked the music of Chuck Berry? Base your answer on Ertegun’s statements above.

• Does one specific aspect of Berry’s career seem especially key to his status as a Rock and Roll pioneer? Or are they all equally important?

• Does Berry’s music feature any particular instrument?

• Is any particular instrument notably absent in the band he’s performing with?

• How, then, would you use this comparison to demonstrate the differences between R&B and early Rock and Roll?
**SUMMARY ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)**

2. To the instructor: Explain to the class that Chuck Berry was introduced to his record company, Chess Records, by Muddy Waters. Key among the differences between R&B and Rock and Roll is the way the latter featured a more “raw” sound, just like the one Ertegun was after. In that shift, the guitar played a role that can’t be underestimated. Because of Chuck Berry and those who came after him, Rock and Roll was soon associated with the electric guitar more than any other instrument.

**HOMEWORK/ASSESSMENT:**

Assign one or more of the following:

- **Written expression:** Have students write their own record review of “Maybellene” by Chuck Berry, as if writing for an audience in 1956 that listens to R&B. In the review, they should explain how Rock and Roll is “new” and what they find better (or worse) about it than R&B. Remember, this is an opinion piece.

- **Research:** Ask students to read the Rock’s Backpages essay on Louis Jordan by Cliff White. Have them write a short response, explaining how Louis Jordan—perhaps Chuck Berry’s biggest influence—distinguished himself in both his music and his performance style, in ways that made him an important figure for many early Rock and Roll musicians.

**EXTENSIONS:**

- Read the Rock’s Backpages article about Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, two songwriters who worked closely with Ahmet Ertegun at Atlantic Records. Write a one-page response to the article that explains the important role of these songwriter/producers in bringing R&B onto the pop charts. Make an argument for what made them great contributors to popular music.

- Have students research Atlantic Records, beginning with the Rock’s Backpages article by Hank Bordowitz that focuses on Ahmet Ertegun. Have them create a classroom presentation that helps others to understand how an independent label like Atlantic had such an impact on American popular music.

**STANDARDS**

**COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS**

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

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

*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 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Writing 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

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

Speaking and Listening 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

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

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

Language 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

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.
VIDEO RESOURCES
• Chuck Berry – Maybellene (1965)
• LaVern Baker – Tra La La (1956)
• Muddy Waters - Rollin’ Stone (1960)

FEATURED PEOPLE
• LaVern Baker
• Chuck Berry
• Ahmet Ertegun
• Louis Jordan
• Muddy Waters