THE RISE OF THE ELECTRIC GUITAR AS ROCK AND ROLL'S DOMINANT SYMBOL

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What factors led to the rise of the electric guitar as the dominant symbol of Rock and Roll?

OVERVIEW

In 1919, Steinway and Sons launched an ad campaign for their pianos with the tagline “The Instrument of the Immortals,” depicting the piano as a symbol of tradition. This was not surprising; the piano had a centuries-old connection to popular music, both “high” and “low.” Despite this association with tradition, the instrument played a key musical role around the dawn of Rock and Roll, when teenagers were regularly rejecting the culture of the past.

Because a piano’s sound is created when felt hammers strike steel strings, the instrument is commonly classified as a member of the percussion family. Given the rhythmic emphasis of Rock and Roll, the piano’s percussive character helped to establish the prominence of “the beat” in early Rock and Roll ensembles. When Jerry Lee Lewis recorded his 1957 version of “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” for Sun Records, the rhythm he pounded out of his piano was so pronounced that it almost rendered the bass and drums unnecessary. That record became Jerry Lee’s first hit single, reaching No. 1 on Billboard’s Country & Western and Rhythm & Blues charts as well as No. 3 on the Pop chart, evidence that the driving piano sound was helping to push Rock and Roll into mainstream America.

Jerry Lee was in a cadre of piano players that helped usher in the Rock and Roll era, including Fats Domino, Little Richard, and Ray Charles. These four musicians were all inducted into the first class of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, a class that contained early Rock and Roll’s most celebrated pioneers. The piano is as much of a presence in that class of Hall of Fame inductees as the guitar. But something happened after Rock and Roll’s earliest years that all but erased the piano’s centrality in the story of Rock and Roll’s birth: the rise of the electric guitar.

The popularity of the guitar began to escalate in the mid-1950s and early 1960s. While piano sales hovered around 200,000 units per year during that time, guitar sales increased 400%, surging from 300,000 units in 1958 to 1.5 million in 1965. Commenting on the rapid escalation of instrument sales in the U.S., a 1967 Billboard article reported that “the golden-growth instrument has, of course, been the guitar.” The increase in sales was mirrored by the
guitar’s presence in the music itself. The electric guitar in particular was everywhere in popular recordings, a trend that had started in the 1950s. By 1969, musicians like Jimi Hendrix, Pete Townshend, Keith Richards, and Eric Clapton helped make the electric guitar a powerful symbol and the guitarist a larger-than-life figure. The phrase “Clapton is God” reportedly began to appear graffitied on walls in Britain, signaling the reverence that some audience members had for the electric guitar virtuoso. The piano and those who played it never got such attention, not in Rock and Roll culture.

Teenagers of the late 1960s displayed an obsession with their generation’s Rock and Roll guitarists. But this never would have happened had the electric guitar not captured the attention of young people a decade earlier. Throughout the 1950s, there was a global fascination with technology, speed, and innovation, set against the backdrop of the “space race” and other pursuits of modernity’s next leaps forward. Electric guitars became coveted objects for their modern design and their capability to produce new distorted sounds through electronic manipulation. If the piano was “the Instrument of the Immortals,” a symbol of tradition, the guitar was an emblem of the future.

Electric guitar marketers and retailers in the 1950s had their eye on a particular future – the new generation of young people. American teenagers, who wielded an immense spending power during the postwar economic boom, became the target demographic for companies like Fender and even Sears. Knowing that a piano wouldn’t be an affordable purchase for a teenager, guitar makers introduced models like the 1950 Fender Telecaster and the Silvertone electric guitar series (the latter marketed to millions through the Sears Catalog). These instruments were priced on a comparatively lower scale that allowed teenagers to purchase electric guitars without parental assistance – or approval.

Of course, the success of the electric guitar hardly rests on the efforts of its designers, marketers, and retailers. It was the way guitarists looked and sounded while playing that allowed the guitar to commandeer the musical space once occupied by piano, and go well-beyond. The diverse sounds and styles of early Rock and Roll artists seemed to offer a host of options for young people to emulate. Chuck Berry was the slick showman who danced with his guitar onstage while playing Boogie Woogie-style riffs lifted straight from the piano. Elvis was the hip-swiveling, handsome star that young guitarists admired for blending styles like Country, Bluegrass, and Rhythm and Blues. Buddy Holly had the accessible, bespectacled charm of the boy-next-door and inspired countless new Fender Stratocaster owners, and others, with his rhythmic playing. Bo Diddley emphasized the percussive nature of the electric guitar, showing how the instrument could cover what the piano had done in earlier recordings by Fats Domino, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, and others. The frenetic piano-playing style that drove Jerry Lee’s “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” to the top of the charts was now transposed to the guitar.

The disparity in the popularity between the piano and the electric guitar became more pronounced still after the Beatles appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show in 1964. Their instrumentation, consisting of two electric guitars, electric bass, and drums, became the archetype for the next generation of popular musicians. There was hardly a piano in sight, even
OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

if it still appeared on recordings. When the American Music Conference issued a survey in 1967 to report on the explosive growth of electric instruments, 17-year old survey respondent Billy McMillin aptly said, “The guitar is the instrument of our time. Bach had his piano; our generation plays the guitar.”

Through a comparative analysis of magazine advertisements, graphs, and statistical data, students will discuss the factors that led to the surge in guitar sales in postwar America. Live performances by Jerry Lee Lewis and the Beatles serve to highlight the role of piano versus that of the electric guitar in defining the look and the sound of the Rock and Roll band.
Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. **KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):**
   - How the piano was arguably the central instrument in early Rock and Roll, before the dominance of electric guitar
   - The growth of the purchasing power of teenagers in postwar America
   - How the electric guitar became a symbol of modernity, tapping into a cultural fascination with technology in the 1950s
   - Various cultural and historical factors that led to a spike in electric guitar sales in the U.S., as compared to piano sales, in the 1950s and 1960s

2. **BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):**
   - Analyze live music performances, comparing and contrasting different instrumentation and performance styles
   - Interpret and discuss the meaning of a variety of primary source materials, including a 1950s magazine advertisement and a 1967 Billboard article on the growth of electric guitar sales
   - Common Core: Integrate quantitative analysis (e.g., charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text (CCSS Literacy in History/Social Studies 7)
   - Common Core: Engage in collaborative group discussions where students will build on each other’s ideas and express their own opinions (CCSS Speaking and Listening 1)

**MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:**

1. In 2002, Spin, a leading music magazine, published a list of the top 50 bands of all time. Display the images of the top five bands from this list. Ask students to write down all of the instruments they see in the photos.
PROCEDURE:

1. To illustrate how the piano provided an anchor for the early Rock and Roll ensemble, distribute Handout 2: The Energy of the Rock and Roll Piano. Students will use this worksheet to take notes on the musical performances presented in the following clips.

Show clip of “In a Shanty in Old Shanty Town,” a popular song during the 1930s and 40s. Students should record their observations on their worksheets. Next, show clip of Jerry Lee Lewis performing “Whole Lotta Shakin’,” an early Rock and Roll recording originally released in 1957. Students should complete their worksheets.

2. Have volunteers share their observations with the class. Ask students:

   • Which of these two performances feels more energetic to you? Why?
   • The piano is commonly classified as a percussion instrument. How is Jerry Lee Lewis making the most of the piano’s percussive character in this performance?
   • How do you think an adult generation raised on big band music like “In A Shanty In Old Shanty Town” might have reacted to Jerry Lee Lewis?

3. Play a clip of Reverend Jimmie Snow preaching against Rock and Roll in 1956. Ask students:

   • What might Reverend Snow think about Jerry Lee Lewis? How might Reverend Snow describe the teenage audience depicted in the clip of “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On”?
   • Why might Reverend Snow view “the beat” of Rock and Roll as controversial? What might this type of rhythm inspire young people to do?
   • What are some words or images that come to mind when you think of a piano? What styles of music other than Rock and Roll might you associate with a piano?

   The Piano: A Symbol of the Past vs. The Electric Guitar: An Emblem of the Future

4. Display the following two advertisements, one from Steinway and Sons (1920) and one from Fender (1953). Explain that the Steinway tagline, “Instrument of the Immortals,” was in use from 1919 to the mid-1950s.
Ask students:

- Which of these two ads connects its product with the idea of tradition? What words and images help to make this connection?
- Which ad presents its instrument as something modern and futuristic? What words and images help to make this connection?
- Which of these two ads do you think might appeal to a teenager in the 1950s, and why?

5. Display an image of the record cover for Chuck Berry’s 1956 single “Roll Over Beethoven.”

Ask students:

- What is being depicted on this record sleeve? What does the song title emphasize about the relationship between Rock and Roll and classical music? How does this image relate back to the Steinway and Fender advertisements?

6. In addition to being new and free from tradition, electric guitars tapped into a cultural fascination with modern technology. The “space race” between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, as well as other pursuits of modernity’s next leaps forward that were taking place during the 1950s and 60s, captivated the imaginations of many Americans.

Display images from popular culture including a Weird Science comic book (1951), a poster for the film Forbidden Planet (1956), and Popular Mechanics magazine (1957).

Ask students:

- How do these images reflect a 1950s American fascination with the future?

7. Display the following advertisement for Gibson’s “Flying V” model guitar (1958).

Ask students:

- What are some words and phrases used in the advertisement to describe Gibson’s new “Flying V” guitar?
- Given the American fascination with futuristic technology, what do you think might have appealed to a 1950s teenager about the look of an electric guitar?

8. Display side-by-side images of guitarist
Bo Diddley holding a guitar he designed himself and pianist Fats Domino at a piano. Both Diddley and Domino had No. 1 hits on the Billboard Rhythm and Blues chart in 1955 with “Bo Diddley” and “Ain’t It a Shame,” respectively.

Ask students:

• Describe Bo Diddley’s guitar. What symbol of modernity adorns the guitar’s body? (If the students cannot see, it is an image of an airplane covering the pick guard). How would you explain its symbolic significance there?

• How does Bo Diddley’s guitar help to convey his individuality as a performer in a way that Fats Domino’s piano does not?

• How does Fats Domino’s piano compare with Bo Diddley’s guitar in terms of modern or futuristic design? Which instrument suggests a stronger sense of forward energy?

The Electric Guitar Brings a New Energy to the Stage

9. Play a clip of Little Richard performing “Tutti Frutti” in 1957 back-to-back with a clip of Chuck Berry performing the guitar solo “Johnny B. Goode” in 1965, a song he originally released in 1958. Ask students to take notes comparing how Little Richard and Chuck Berry are playing their respective instruments. Students should focus on the way each musician is moving onstage.

Discuss as a class:

• How would you describe the way Little Richard moves while playing the piano? How would you describe how Chuck Berry moves while playing the guitar?

• How does the piano compare to the guitar in terms of the mobility it allows the performer?

• What do you think teenagers in the 1950s found captivating about the way a Rock and Roll guitarist can perform while onstage? Why might a performance like Chuck Berry’s have enticed teenagers to want to buy electric guitars of their own?


Ask students:

• What do these images suggest about the popularity of the guitar in the 1950s and early 60s?

• How might the very act of holding a guitar allow a teenager to emulate a Rock and Roll star like Elvis Presley? Why might a television performance like Chuck Berry’s or a movie starring Elvis have enticed teenagers to buy guitars of their own?

Mention that Elvis received his first guitar around the time of his eleventh birthday. He had initially asked his parents for a bicycle, but his mother bought him a guitar because it was much less expensive. Discuss as a class:

• What does this information tell us about the cost of a guitar relative to an item like a bicycle? How do you think the cost of a guitar might compare to the cost of a piano?
PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

The Electric Guitar Becomes an Affordable Instrument

11. Project an image of the following quote on the board. Invite a student volunteer to read aloud. Ask students:

Jerry Lee Lewis grew up in a poor farming community in Ferriday, Louisiana during the 1940s. Jerry Lee was around eight years old when he saw his father driving up to their farmhouse.

“He had a piano on the back of his truck, and my eyes almost fell out of my head. I found out later he mortgaged his farm to buy it for me.”

• Was a piano an expensive item for the Lewis family? How do we know? How do you think the cost of a piano might compare to that of an electric guitar? Defend your answer.

12. Display side-by-side images of a Sears Catalog advertisement for the 1956 Silvertone electric guitar series and a 1950 advertisement for an upright piano.

• What is the least expensive electric guitar pictured? What is the most expensive? How do the prices of these guitars compare to the price of the upright piano listed? (Note to teacher: Explain that $24.95 for a guitar is equal to about $217 in 2015. Whereas $595 for a piano is equal to about $5,920 in 2015.)

13. Display table of the Average Weekly Income of a Teenage Boy in 1946 and 1956 along with Sample Costs of Goods and Services in 1950. Please note, the weekly income includes allowance received from parents plus job earnings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average Weekly Income of a Teenage Boy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>$2.41 (Equivalent to approximately $30 in 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>$8.96 (Equivalent to approximately $78 in 2015)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Sample Cost of Goods and Services in 1950:

- Hamburger: $0.15
- Gasoline: $0.18/gallon
- Ticket to the Movies: $0.40
- Vinyl Record (45rpm): $0.79
- Minimum Wage: $0.75/hr.

Discuss as a class:

• How much more did the average teenage boy earn per week in 1956 as compared to 1946?

• What can this table tell us about the U.S. economy and the purchasing power of the teenager during the 1950s?

• Based on a teenager’s average weekly income of $8.96 in 1956, how long would it take him or her to save up for the cheapest electric guitar pictured above? (About 3 weeks.) How long would it take to save for the piano? (Over a year, about 66 weeks.)

Part II: The Beatles and the Rapid Rise of Guitar Sales

14. The relatively affordable cost of a guitar also appealed to teenagers in Britain, a country that did not experience a postwar economic boom as had occurred in the United States. Compared to American teenagers, British teens had little extra money to spend, which meant that a piano was out of the question. Many formed their own bands with inexpensive and sometimes improvised instruments. These makeshift bands would often perform in unofficial public spaces.

Play interview with musician Graham Nash discussing the popularity of Skiffle music in 1950s England. Ask the students:

• How did the devastation caused by bombing during World War II affect the lives of teenagers
in cities such as Manchester and Liverpool in the 1950s? Why was Skiffle music attractive to many of these teenagers?

• What aspects of the guitar, as opposed to the piano, made it practical for young Skiffle musicians in the U.K.?

• Describe the instruments used in Skiffle music. (Note to teacher: to illustrate the do-it-yourself nature of Skiffle music, display an image of Skiffle band playing in a public street, featuring a guitar, a banjo, a washboard, and a bass fashioned out of a wooden crate).

15. Refer back to the image of the Top 5 Rock bands according to Spin. Note that the No. 1 band listed is the Beatles. Members of the Beatles grew up in postwar England, with connections to Skiffle music. The Beatles were rooted in a style and genre that favored the guitar.

Play a clip of the Beatles performing “Long Tall Sally” in February 1964, on their first visit to the U.S. This concert was two days after their historic television appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show when 73 million viewers tuned in to watch (a record for that time). Ask students:

• Describe the instrumentation of the Beatles.

• What aspects of the guitar, as opposed to the piano, made it practical for young Skiffle musicians in the U.K.?

16. Play an audio clip of Little Richard performing “Long Tall Sally” from his debut album in 1956. Ask students:

• How does Little Richard’s original version of “Long Tall Sally” from 1956 compare to the Beatles rendition in 1964? What instrument have the Beatles left out of their performance?

• What does the omission of a piano in the Beatles performance suggest about how the role of the piano in a Rock and Roll ensemble has changed by the 1960s?

• Think back to the way teenagers in the 1950s identified with Elvis Presley. Why might owning a guitar allow a teenager in the 1960s to identify with the Beatles? How do you think this surge in the Beatles’ popularity affected guitar sales in the U.S.?


Based on the data presented, ask the students:

• What does this graph depict? At what point are guitar sales at their lowest? At what point are they at their highest? How does the guitar data compare to the piano data?

• During what year(s) do guitar sales increase the most? How might this increase relate to the Beatles and “Beatlemania” that was sweeping the nation during the 1960s?
SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Label three sections of the room with the following phrases: Emblem of the Future, Performance Mobility, and Financial Accessibility. Instruct students to select one of these three options to address the following question: What do you believe is the most significant factor in the electric guitar supplanting the piano as the dominant symbol of Rock and Roll? Students will move to the area of the room that aligns with their answer. (Note: The teacher should read the following descriptions to the class for clarification before releasing students to move about the room.)

1. Emblem of the Future: Compared to a piano, an electric guitar looks innovative, futuristic, and is able to create new sounds.

2. Performance Mobility: The high-energy performance that would come to be associated with acts from The Who and Jimi Hendrix to Nirvana and the White Stripes becomes possible.

3. Financial Accessibility: For a teenager in postwar America, an electric guitar is more affordable than a new piano.

Once students have moved to their chosen area of the room, each group should select one resource from the lesson (either a video, an advertisement, or data from the graph) that supports their claim. Have groups share out their arguments with the entire class.

WRITING PROMPT:

Assign students to read the 1975 article “Buddy Holly: The Rocker Next Door with the Mail-Order Axe” (excerpted in Handout 3). Students will write a 3-4 paragraph essay about Buddy Holly and the rise of guitar sales in the U.S. How did Buddy Holly stand out among other Rock and Roll artists of his era and how did he help to convince “nondescript male children” that they could play guitar and form Rock and Roll bands? Students should use primary source materials from this lesson (including the Sears Catalog advertisements and the graph of guitar sales) in their essay to address how mail-order guitars may have contributed to the rise of the instrument’s popularity in the United States.

EXTENSIONS:

1. Distribute “The Switched-On-Market, How To Turn Up Your Volume” from Billboard, July 1, 1967 (excerpted in Handout 4). Invite student volunteers to read the article out loud, alternating paragraphs. Ask students to underline any interesting statistics or data that stand out to them in the article. Read aloud the following quote:

“The guitar is the instrument of our time. Bach had his piano; our generation plays the guitar. Young people can express themselves through the guitar. What they can’t say, they can play.”

- Billy McMillin, age 17
EXTENSIONS: (CONTINUED)

Discuss as a class:

- If you had to choose, what do you think “the instrument of our time” is today and why?

2. Assign students to conduct independent research into one of the iconic American guitar players in early Rock and Roll. Students will need to create a poster on their selected artist. The poster must include an image of the artist, biographical information, a picture and description of the guitar model he’s most known for playing, a list of their early Rock and Roll recordings and their chart positions, and a description of the influence they had on future Rock and Roll artists. Students can select from the following artists:
  - Elvis Presley
  - Buddy Holly
  - Chuck Berry
  - Bo Diddley

Have students present their posters in class, noting similarities and differences between artists.

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

- Literacy 7: Integrate quantitative or technical analysis (e.g., charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text.
College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language for Grades 6-12

Speaking and Listening 1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

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.
VIDEO RESOURCES

- Chuck Berry – Johnny B. Good Guitar Solo (1965)
- Jerry Lee Lewis – Whole Lotta Shakin’ (1964)
- Little Richard – Long Tall Sally (1956)
- Graham Nash – Skiffle
- The Beatles - Long Tall Sally (1964)
- Johnny Long and His Orchestra - In a Shanty in Old Shanty Town (1940s)
- Reverend Jimmie Snow – Preaching Against Rock and Roll (1956)
- Little Richard – Tutti Frutti (1957)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- The Beatles
- Chuck Berry
- Bo Diddley
- Jerry Lee Lewis
- Little Richard
- Elvis Presley

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Inductees
- Handout 2: The Energy of the Rock and Roll Piano
- Handout 3: “Buddy Holly: The Rocker Next Door With The Mail-Order Axe”