



ROCK AND ROLL GOES TO THE MOVIES

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did movies help to introduce Rock and Roll culture to mainstream audiences in the 1950s?

OVERVIEW

As the influence of teenagers expanded in the 1950s, it did not take long for movie studios to tap into their fascination with Rock and Roll. Some historians argue that the first so-called “Rock and Roll movie” to cause a sensation was *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), a film depicting the struggles of a high school teacher with a class full of “juvenile delinquents.” The film famously opened to the sound of “Rock Around the Clock” by Bill Haley & His Comets. The song reportedly played at such a high volume that teenage audiences rose from their seats to either dance in the aisles or to vandalize the auditorium, depending on the media coverage. *Blackboard Jungle* sent “Rock Around the Clock” directly to the top of the Billboard charts, while the movie’s notoriety led to widespread censorship. The controversy only further increased public interest in Rock and Roll, and Hollywood was ready to meet the demand.



In the aftermath of *Blackboard Jungle*, many other films emerged that featured Rock and Roll culture and its world. Among these were musical films such as *Rock Around the Clock*—light on storyline and constructed mainly as a showcase for the top performers of the day. There were also films in which the singing star became the movie star, typified by the films of Elvis Presley. Movies including *Jailhouse Rock* drew large audiences who came to see Elvis sing his hits while playing dramatic—but always musical—leading men. And then there were films that did not feature popular music at all, but nonetheless managed to capture the Rock and Roll attitude—particularly when they told stories of teenage life from the perspective of the teens themselves. In *Rebel Without a Cause*, James Dean did not sing a note, but captured the internal struggles of adolescent angst on film as no one had before. Dean’s rebellious screen persona would become as emblematic as Elvis’ swiveling hips in defining the look of early Rock and Roll.

In this lesson, students assume the role of entertainment industry professionals responsible for marketing a selection of movies from the early Rock and Roll era. Following an examination of trailers, posters, newspaper articles, and the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, students will present to the class on the various stakeholders that helped shape the way Rock and Roll culture was introduced to mainstream movie audiences in the 1950s.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The various subgenres of Rock and Roll movies that appeared in the mid-to-late 1950s
- Anxieties surrounding the release and popularity of the film *Blackboard Jungle* due to its depictions of race and juvenile delinquency
- How the Production Code was used to monitor film content prior to the 1968 adoption of a ratings system
- The specialized roles of various professional organizations in producing, marketing, and exhibiting American movies

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Analyze historical documents, periodicals, and film trailers
- Make connections between a selection of films concerning Rock and Roll culture and concerns over the perceived threat of juvenile delinquency in the mid-1950s
- Common Core: Students will work in groups to discuss the American film industry from a variety of professional perspectives, including those of the film studio marketing executives, record labels, the MPAA, and independent theater owners (CCSS Reading 1; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Play the trailer for *Blackboard Jungle* (1955). Students should take notes on any words and phrases the narrator uses to describe the onscreen action and music. Discuss as a class:

- What is this movie about? How does the film depict teenagers?
- By playing “Rock Around the Clock” over the image of “teenage savages,” what does the film seem to suggest about Rock and Roll music?

Explain that *Blackboard Jungle* was the first movie to feature a Rock and Roll song on its soundtrack. After the film’s release, “Rock Around the Clock” went to number one on Billboard’s Pop charts, where it remained for eight weeks. However, due to some people’s concerns over the content of the film, *Blackboard Jungle* was banned in several American cities.

2. Display June 4, 1955 New York Times article reporting the ban on *Blackboard Jungle* in Atlanta. Invite a student to read the article aloud. Discuss as a class:

- What are some of the reasons the Atlanta board of censors cite for banning the film? Based on your observations from watching the trailer, do you think the ban was warranted?
- Do you think the controversy over the film helped or hurt the popularity of the song “Rock Around the Clock?” Explain your answer.

PROCEDURE:

1. Explain that the class will view three trailers for movies released soon after *Blackboard Jungle: Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *Rock Around the Clock* (1956), and *Jailhouse Rock* (1957). Each of these films addressed concerns about teenagers in the mid-1950s, particularly the perceived threat of juvenile delinquency and the rising influence of Rock and Roll culture.
2. Divide class into four teams and distribute Handouts 1-4 (links below) to the respective teams. Explain that each team will represent a group of 1950s entertainment industry professionals. Before playing the first trailer, each team should review their handout which explains the role of their organization and a set of criteria which the team will use to review the movies. Each team will have a different final report to share with the class. Check for understanding before playing the first trailer.

Team 1: The Film Studio (Handout 1: Movie Posters)

Team 2: The Record Label (Handout 2: Soundtrack Credits)

Team 3: The Motion Picture Association of America (Handout 3: The Production Code)

Team 4: The Theater Owners of America (Handout 4: Harrison's Reports)

3. Play trailer for *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Allow teams a few minutes to review their handouts and discuss the trailer as a group. Repeat the same process for *Rock Around the Clock* (1956) and *Jailhouse Rock* (1957).
4. Once you have screened each trailer, allow teams a few minutes to discuss and reach their final conclusions about the films.
5. Have each team present their findings to the class. For presentations, teams should elect several representatives to introduce their professional organization, explain their assigned task, and describe their methodology to determine which movie to promote or restrict.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

To check for understanding, students will submit to the teacher an “exit ticket” on a blank piece of paper. On the paper, students will write 3-4 sentences in which they pick one of the four trailers viewed during the lesson (including *Blackboard Jungle*) and discuss why they would most want to see that movie in its entirety. Students may base their decision on the film’s subject matter, music featured, star actors, the reviews it received upon first release, or any combination of these factors.

EXTENSION:

Ask students to read Handout 5: “Intelligent Handling of a Touchy Problem” — an article from the April 9, 1955 issue of Harrison’s Reviews. (Explain that Harrison’s Reviews was a motion picture trade journal for independent theater owners that published film reviews and professional advice for theater owners.)

Write a short op-ed to Harrison’s Reviews responding to the RKO Theatre in New Brunswick, New Jersey’s decision to run a special trailer at the conclusion of each screening of *Blackboard Jungle*. Do you agree with the management’s decision? If yes, explain why you think the strategy helped the community, and if no, explain what you might have done differently to address people’s concerns about the film.

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 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.

Speaking and Listening 5: Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, images, music, sound) and visual displays in presentations to clarify information

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

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.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Blackboard Jungle Trailer (1955)
- Rebel Without A Cause Trailer (1955)
- Elvis Presley – Jailhouse Rock Trailer (1957)
- Rock Around the Clock Trailer (1956)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Bill Haley and His Comets
- Elvis Presley

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Movie Posters
- Handout 2: Soundtrack Credits
- Handout 3: The Production Code
- Handout 4: Harrison's Reports
- Handout 5: Intelligent Handling of a Touchy Problem