



REAL GEOGRAPHY

EXPLORING THE GEOGRAPHY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

McGraw-Hill Higher Education

“Geography of Rock n’ Roll” by Jon C. Malinowski, Ph.D.

Once ridiculed, the study of popular culture has gained acceptance in the halls of academia over the past two decades. Music is a vital part of our cultural fabric, and a knowledge of the origins and diffusion of our popular music styles can reveal other changes in our society.

Rock and roll has a complex origin strongly tied to critical

demographic and social movements in America. Modern rock springs out of older forms such as blues, rockabilly, and rhythm & blues.

Blues migrated northward from its hearth in the Mississippi Delta and caught on in northern cities such as Kansas City and Chicago. The reason for this movement was the large out-migration of southern Blacks in the early 20th century northward to industrial jobs in the Manufacturing Belt. Thus, relocation diffusion is an important part of the rock story.

Once in the north, blues evolved into the Chicago electric blues sound and later rhythm and blues. Chess Records of Chicago recorded many early rock performers.

From the late 1940s on, most northern cities, plus Los Angeles, developed record labels for black artists performing rhythm and blues. Atlantic Records in New York was to become one of the most famous, as was Motown (founded 1959).

The firm foundation in the northern, industrial cities can be seen in the important role played by Cleveland disc jockey



Alan Freed, who organized the first rock and roll concert in 1952.

As time went on, rock and related forms garnered an increasingly large white audience, and a transition took place from black performers to more white performers. Sun Records in Memphis was one of the first labels to capitalize on white interest in black music with white performers. Remember that this was still an era of strong racial discrimination in much of America. Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee

Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Johnny Cash were Sun’s Million Dollar Quartet of performers.

In time, rock spread through relocation diffusion to England, where early records performers such as Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and others influenced youth that would later form groups such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Ironically, the British Invasion so often mentioned was simply bringing back home a musical style that had American origins.

Further Research

1. Research the importance in rock history of one of the following cities: Seattle, Philadelphia, or Los Angeles.
2. Investigate the origins of one of these subgenres of rock: Surf, Punk, New Wave, Heavy Metal.
3. How are hip-hop and rap related to the history of rock and roll and the blues?
4. Find out what you can about important rock performers outside of North American and Great Britain. What are the most important groups from non-Anglo-American regions?
5. How did racism affect the popularity of rock and roll during its early days in America?

Links:

- History of Rock <http://www.history-of-rock.com>
- Sun Records <http://www.sunrecords.com/>
- The Blue Highway <http://thebluehighway.com/>