

Developing wider listening: pop music of the 1950s

KS4/5

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Introduction

Since November 2020, we've been exploring ideas for **wider listening** – a term familiar to all those teaching and studying GCSE and A level music – in a range of resources on the main time periods of 'classical' music as well as two each on film music and musical theatre.

Over the next few months, we're going to switch our attention to the explosive rise of what's generally known as rock and pop music, starting with the 1950s this month, and then devoting a resource to each of the following decades of the 20th century.

The umbrella terms **rock** and **pop** cover a huge range of music and do not describe any particular genres themselves, rather a phenomenon that quickly rose to dominate and underscore day-to-day life, particularly in America and Britain, after the end of the Second World War. Spearheaded and influenced by the popularity of **jazz**, **dance** music and **musical theatre** in the 1920s, 30s and 40s, the increasing accessibility of certain kinds of music made them hugely popular, particularly with young people, as the 1950s dawned. We'll look at some of the reasons for this popularity, explore an extensive cross-section of the most influential artists of the decade and, of course, provide practical and listening ideas linked to the music we encounter.

Now that wider listening is such a key part of the exam boards' music specifications, students taking GCSE and A level music need to have a broad understanding of a range of musical styles in addition to any set works they're studying. But an appreciation and understanding of the background and context of *any* music they listen to or play is an incredibly useful skill for *all* musicians, irrespective of what they're studying. It increases their enjoyment as they make links between music they do and do not know, and helps them to find parallels across genres, cultures, traditions and time periods.

I hope in these five resources we can identify some of these parallels. We'll discover that in the 'pop world', the naming of genres is largely subjective, often confusing and sometimes contradictory, but all music, whatever its style and however it's labelled, is reflective of and influenced by the world we live in, with perhaps surprising and deeply rooted links existing between genres that on the surface may seem very different from each other.

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Elvis Presley in Jailhouse Rock, 1957

When did pop music begin?

The idea of using the words ‘rock’ and ‘pop’, along with all other kinds of labels applied to music like ‘classical’, ‘blues’, ‘funk’, ‘soul’ and ‘jazz’, began in the early part of the 20th century. These words almost always came from media sources, as people reporting on new musical trends tried to find easy, snappy ways to describe them.

This helpful article (www.bbc.co.uk/music/articles/dc64e24d-c4e7-4e34-b2f7-e34a00ea16ad) sheds more light on the origins of some of these words, and your students might be surprised to learn of them.

As for ‘pop’, it’s obviously short for the word ‘popular’. This is a misnomer in a way, because we tend to use the word ‘popular’ as a description of something’s appeal – such as in the context of a ‘popular’ TV show or a ‘popular’ breakfast cereal. In actual fact, the word simply comes from the Latin for **people**, so ‘popular’ music probably got its tag to help explain its roots and its function – as music for the ordinary person – to distinguish it from the more arty, sometimes less accessible world of concert halls and opera houses.

This means, of course, that popular music is not just a modern phenomenon. Prior to the 20th century, there would have been huge amounts of music that could be called ‘music of the people’, but most forms of regular, day-to-day music that ordinary people engaged in were not written down, so we only have anecdotal evidence of it, usually from composers and musicologists who discovered and bothered to notate examples of it.

The big change came when scientists such as Thomas Edison invented ways to record sound, which happened in the last years of the 19th century and developed apace in the early part of the 20th. By the 1920s, musicians involved in the performing of popular styles like **blues, ragtime, musical theatre** and **jazz** were able to make audio recordings of their work.

The new technology of the early 20th century like the **radio** and the **gramophone** had two seismic effects:

- ▶ Popular music could be distributed to places far away from where it was actually being performed.
- ▶ Popular music could be preserved for later generations to hear it.



A high-tech record player and radio set from the early 1950s

The concept of popular music therefore began with these early 20th-century genres. After the Second World War, it gained traction through both the increasing availability and development of this technology, and growing numbers of young people with money to spend on it. The trends in 1950s popular music became more and more driven by youth culture, and it was in this decade that **teenagers** became seen as an influential social group.

The diversity of popular music in the 1950s

Billboard magazine began publishing its **hit parade** – a weekly list of the most popular songs – in the 1930s as the commercialisation of music really took hold, fuelled by the increasing popularity of records and the influence of disc jockeys (or DJs) who presented music programmes on different radio stations across the US. Following the end of the war, the **charts** (the main one was known as the **Billboard Hot 100**) took into account record and sheet music sales, juke-box selection and radio airplay, quickly becoming the most important measurement of success in the pop music world.

At the start of the 1950s, songs that were high in the *Billboard* chart featured artists including Nat King Cole, Perry Como, the Andrews Sisters, Doris Day and Tony Bennett, all of whom were known for their sentimental, lyrical singing style born out of the popular swing style of the 1930s and 40s. Swing bands themselves had been affected by the poor availability of musicians during the war, and so the way was clear for singers to produce strings of recordings with contracted studio musicians, paid for by record companies.

By way of example and context, play your students two or more of these hits from the early 1950s and get them to find musical characteristics that they have in common:

- ▶ Patti Page: 'All My Love' (1950) www.youtube.com/watch?v=IH1mhUT9S1I
- ▶ Les Paul and Mary Ford: 'How High the Moon' (1951) www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkGf1GHAXhE.
Les Paul was one of the first to play a solid-body electric guitar, and instruments bearing his name are still famous throughout rock and pop music



A Les Paul 'Sunburst' guitar

- ▶ The Four Aces: 'Heart and Soul' (1952). www.youtube.com/watch?v=2jJWmYlgdCY
Students might recognise this chord sequence and melody.
- ▶ Dean Martin: 'That's Amore' (1953). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbTvKUttFXI>
The famous Rat Pack singer's first hit.

Music of the period was often sentimental, always tuneful and backed by orchestral instruments, and with the focus very much on the singer. **Close harmonies** were popular, and any use of electric instruments (like Les Paul's guitar) were within the jazz or Latin context of the music.

In 1955, however, something significant changed in the make-up of the charts. The listening activity below explores the differences in style between some of the songs that appeared on the Hot 100 from that year and the year after.

The charts of 1955 and 1956

Here are some examples of the chart hits of 1955 and 1956. Pick four or five of them, and ask students to listen, noting down and discussing answers to the following questions:

- ▶ How is this music similar and/or different from the music in the charts earlier in the decade?
- ▶ What **instrumental features** stand out in each of these examples? Think about which instruments are played and how they are played. Which instruments seem to be the most noticeable?
- ▶ What **features of the singing** stand out? Think about how the artists sing and how vocals and instruments work together.
- ▶ What do you notice about the use of **rhythm and harmony** in these songs?
- ▶ What are the **lyrics** about?
- ▶ How do these songs differ from each other? Are they all from the same **genre** or style, in your opinion?

From 1955:

- ▶ Bill Haley and his Comets: 'Rock Around the Clock' www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSzdN8ipyws
- ▶ Frank Sinatra: 'Love and Marriage' www.youtube.com/watch?v=trht-A4dXZc
- ▶ Chuck Berry: 'Maybellene' www.youtube.com/watch?v=v124foioXh4
- ▶ The Penguins: 'Earth Angel' www.youtube.com/watch?v=ledtDi7xHTo]

From 1956:

- ▶ Johnny Cash: 'I Walk the Line' www.youtube.com/watch?v=xObSJWIWuio
- ▶ Carl Perkins: 'Blue Suede Shoes' www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRNyvO4QouY
- ▶ Elvis Presley: 'Hound Dog' www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNYWl13lWhY
- ▶ The Platters: 'The Great Pretender' www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEzfhclKO8Q

The changes heard in the music of the mid-1950s reflected changes that were happening in western society and culture following the war. While older people strove to hold on to the norms of the past, reflected in the Frank Sinatra song, for example, a lot of innovation, driven by younger people who perhaps for the first time were experiencing financial and social independence, pushed new kinds of music to the fore.

In the United States in particular, racial tension was a big – and unsavoury – part of society in the 1950s. Many black musicians found their routes to success blocked by continued segregation and racial differences, with a tendency for record companies to get white artists to 'front' black-influenced music. You might like to illustrate this by showing students these two examples of the song 'Tutti Frutti':

- ▶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cj05909OwqY
- ▶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFxTvffJqOg

The first version was Little Richard's first hit in 1955, co-written by him and reaching number 26 on the charts. The second version, a cover by Pat Boone, sold more copies despite arguably being a less strong performance, reaching number 12 in 1956. Elvis Presley – often described at the time as a white artist with a black voice – also covered the song, placing it on the B side of his version of 'Blue Suede Shoes', which made number 20 in 1956.

We're going to divide 1950s pop music up into four main genres, to reflect the changing nature of music in the charts as the decade wore on. This will show quite clearly how the dominance of white artists was gradually eroded as the energy and excitement of black-influenced music slowly but surely replaced the traditional styles like swing and country.

Popular songs

At the start of the 1950s, much of the music in the charts was what we might now call **traditional pop** songs. The most popular artists in this genre were well turned-out, smartly dressed, wholesome-looking women and men who would appear regularly on television – sometimes in their own specials – and performed a variety of music from original, specially written songs to their own versions of famous jazz and swing **standards** from the 1930s and 40s.

Capitalising on the popularity of **big-band swing** music during and after the war, these artists, who included Tony Bennett, Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald and Peggy Lee, became known for their individual vocal styles and presented music with catchy, simple melodies and relatable lyrics. Some, like Doris Day, Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby, featured as leading actors in film musicals of the day and had associated chart success with songs from those films. Day's film *Calamity Jane*, released in 1953, is a good example of this, with her song 'Secret Love' making the charts that year.

The listening exercise below is based on one such hit, by Nat King Cole in 1951.

'Unforgettable' by Nat King Cole

Established jazz crooner Nat King Cole recorded 'Unforgettable' in 1951, not long after it was composed by songwriter Irving Gordon. Its orchestral arrangement was written by Nelson Riddle, a highly regarded orchestrator and musical director who worked with all the major popular singers of the time.

Ask your students to listen to Cole's mesmerising live performance of the song (www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFyuOEovTOE) and answer the following questions as they listen:

- 1 Which instrument gives Cole his 'note' that allows such a smooth start to the song?
- 2 Is the song in a major or a minor key? Does it end in the same key it began?
- 3 Which instruments provide a countermelody in the opening phrases?
- 4 Which instruments are prominent in keeping the beat, or pulse?
- 5 Nat King Cole was known for his strong, expressive and very personal interpretations. Describe some of the ways in which he gives this song such a personal and expressive performance.

Answers:

- 1 Piano
- 2 Major. It ends in a different major key – each verse modulates from F major to B flat major.
- 3 Violins
- 4 Mainly a (pizzicato) double bass, though very faint drums played with brushes can be heard.
- 5 Cole's sings with warm tone and he allows long notes to develop in dynamics with strength of projection. He is very 'loose' with rhythm, making sure the words have time to come across, supported by colourful sound.

Country music

Country music rose to prominence in the late 1940s and enjoyed a lot of success in this decade. It's a genre that's still hugely popular today, and its leading artists in the 1950s were Johnny Cash and Hank Williams, both of whom influenced the development of rock 'n' roll through their musical style.

Cash preferred a simple, guitar-led rhythmic style that developed into the **rockabilly** music of Buddy Holly and Carl Perkins. His lyrics were hugely relatable, true to life and covered emotions from sorrow to joy, and he performed with humour and engagement. This made him very popular, and some of his most famous live performances come from prisons, as documented in the excellent 2005 biopic *Walk the Line*, which is well worth watching.

Hank Williams's style was a little more jazz-influenced, incorporating the piano **ragtime** style, and he often wore a Stetson hat in his performances. The music of Williams and similar artists like Gene Autry gained country music its association with the rowdy, cowboy culture of the wild west. In the listening exercise below, we look at the similarities and differences between the music of Cash and Williams.



Sun Studio in Memphis

Comparison exercise: 'I Walk the Line' by Johnny Cash (1956) and 'Your Cheatin' Heart' by Hank Williams (1953)

Cash's self-written song 'I Walk the Line' was his first *Billboard* number 1 hit, selling over 2 million copies. It was recorded at Sun Studio in Memphis, the studio of legendary producer Sam Phillips who helped launch the careers of Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis as well as that of Cash.

Listen to the song here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=xObSJWIWuio

The structure of the song seems very simple, made up of five verses with no chorus. How does Johnny Cash ensure that the song does not become boring?

Now listen to Hank Williams's self-composed song 'Your Cheatin' Heart'. He recorded it in September 1952 in Nashville, considered the home of country music. Tragically, on his way to a show on New Year's Day 1953, Williams died of heart failure caused by his drug and alcohol addiction. He was 29. The song was released that month and sold over a million copies.

Listen to 'Your Cheatin' Heart' here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=6z2t-KfoPjg

The differences between this and Cash's song are quite telling – what are the main ones? What features are similar, that make both these songs successful in the country genre?

Both songs featured in the biopic films about their singers, and you might like to show students these scenes which feature the songs, performed by Joaquin Phoenix (as Cash in *Walk the Line*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=4akqi6YYIJw) and Tom Hiddleston (as Williams, from the film *I Saw the Light*, released in 2015: www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYm5xD31Hhs).

Rhythm and blues

Strongly rooted in the blues music of the early 20th century, rhythm and blues (or **R&B**) became the term for more upbeat jazz-influenced blues music. It also took influences from the **doo-wop** style of vocal groups like the Orioles and the Penguins and the hugely significant black genre of gospel. Propelled forwards by artists like Sam Cooke, the Drifters and Ray Charles, R&B paved the way for **rock 'n' roll** and subsequently for the hugely successful **soul**, **Motown** and **funk** styles of the 1960s and 70s. The investigation below gets students to explore this riff-based genre through a 1959 hit by Ray Charles.

'What I'd Say' by Ray Charles

Towards the end of a concert in December 1958, Ray Charles filled time by improvising, switching between an acoustic and electric piano and instructing his band to follow him. The result was the song 'What I'd Say', which became so much of an audience favourite that Charles decided to record it, divided into two parts, on either side of a single. It was released in June 1959 and was a big hit, subsequently influencing most of the major artists of the early 1960s.

Listen and watch 'What I'd Say' here (www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAJeSS3kktA). Based on what you see and hear, what would you say are the chief features of R&B? What other genres is it similar to?

'What I'd Say' is based on a repeating **riff**, based around this simple chord sequence:

E	E	E	E
A	A	E	E
B	A	E	E

Students might recognise this as the 12-bar blues, a highly influential part of the development of black and roots music which predates the start of the 20th century.

Here is the main riff of the song notated over the chord of E major:



A useful performing and improvising exercise would be to get students to work out how this riff corresponds when changing to the chords of A (subdominant) and B (dominant). Coupled with chords, simple melodies and a Latin-style beat the possibilities for a fun improvisation session are endless!

Racial tension and the emergence of rock 'n' roll

Despite the fact that black and white musicians were treated differently throughout the decade and beyond, with the **civil rights movement** gathering momentum in its quest to redress the racial inequality prevalent in society, the influence of black music was felt very strongly in chart music of the late 1950s, effectively driving the changes heard in the musical styles of the time.

At the forefront was rock 'n' roll, a hybrid of mainly white country music and mainly black R&B. The rock 'n' roll music of Carl Perkins, Buddy Holly and Jerry Lee Lewis leaned more closely to country, sometimes being called **rockabilly**. Other artists – primarily black musicians like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Chubby Checker and Fats Domino – brought the energy and electric power of rock 'n' roll to the fore and became popular with young audiences, though their colour was an issue for many conservative American parents.

Elvis Presley, a young, charismatic performer under the patronage of producer Sam Phillips, burst onto the scene in 1956 with his earthy, black-influenced performances and suggestive dancing, shocking the older generation but appealing to the young, so much so that his early television performances attracted the vast majority of the viewing audience of the time.

While the black pioneers of rock 'n' roll continued to struggle to gain exposure, Presley became a sensation, quickly becoming an **idol** for the teenage generation. Below are two listening exercises to do with your students, based on 1958 hits by Presley and Chuck Berry.

Listening exercise: 'Jailhouse Rock' by Elvis Presley

This is the title song of a 1957 Elvis Presley film, in which he plays a prisoner taught to play guitar by his cellmate. Written by songwriters Leiber and Stoller, who wrote a lot of Presley's hits, 'Jailhouse Rock' quickly became one of his most popular songs, and was a number 1 hit in the US and the UK.

Ask your students to listen to the song here (www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjoRz-uP4Mk) and answer the following questions:

- 1 What similarities can you hear to the R&B style of the Ray Charles song?
- 2 What similarities can you hear to the rockabilly or country style of the Hank Williams and Johnny Cash songs?
- 3 What instruments feature in the arrangement? (Don't be fooled by the video or the lyrics!)
- 4 Describe the use of drums in the arrangement. How do they differ from the way that drums were used in the other songs we've met in this resource?

Listening exercise: 'Johnny B Goode' by Chuck Berry

Guitarist Chuck Berry wrote and recorded this iconic song in 1958, and it has since become one of the best-known songs in all of pop music. Berry wrote it as a semi-autobiography and recorded it with bass, piano and drums in a simple but high-energy arrangement. Get your students to listen to it here (www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ROwVrFoCeg) and answer these questions:

- 1 How does this compare to the Presley song? Which features are similar?
- 2 How do Berry's and Presley's performing styles compare? Why would they have been so appealing, especially to young people?