

*'Don't You Rock Me, Daddy-O': Skiffle and
rock 'n' roll*

Put your glad rags on and join me hon'
We'll have some fun when the clock strikes one
We're gonna rock around the clock tonight
We're gonna rock, rock, rock, 'till broad daylight
We're gonna rock, gonna rock around the clock
tonight

Bill Haley and His Comets, 'Rock Around the Clock'

THE 1950S WITNESSED several short-lived musical crazes: calypso, cha-cha-cha, mambo, skiffle and the one that did not go away, rock 'n' roll. In part the ephemeral nature of popular music reflected a long-standing business model based on novelty and change. In part it reflected a shorter-term reaction against the influence of Tin Pan Alley and Denmark Street, and the dominance of dance bands and crooners in post-war Britain. The highly influential skiffle movement emerged from the self-consciously counter-mainstream trad jazz boom and second folk revival.¹ It fed into the rock 'n' roll craze, which marked a major departure in English popular music. Both skiffle and rock 'n' roll highlight the complex interaction between musical traditions in and between America and Britain, and the importance of syncretic moments which shaped 'the dominant musical tradition of our time' in a way that is not obscured by a misleading contrast between 'Afro- American music' and 'European music.'²

The music was central to the debate about the problematic nature of youth culture, and wider social anxieties about marriage and family.³ The ‘teenager’ was not created in these years but the size of that cohort, its growing purchasing power and its interest in things American, gave it particular prominence.⁴ Unskilled, working-class youths, especially, had more disposable income and more freedom than ever before, in the years between leaving school, aged 15, and getting married, or in the case of young men, doing national service. Whether as indiscriminate and irresponsible consumers of trash culture in milk bars and coffee bars, or as a violent gang member, from the Teddy Boys with their flick-knife or knuckle-duster, to riotous mods and rockers, teenagers, and their cultures, were perceived as a generation apart, posing social, cultural and moral threats.⁵

Skiffle

The origins of skiffle are complex and obscure. The term was used in early twentieth century America and applied to ‘do-it-yourself’ jazz bands, often using unusual and improvised instruments, which had much in common with the ‘Jiggerum Juggerum’ bands found in England from the late nineteenth century onwards. It was a democratic, ‘bottom up’ music that emphasised amateur participation and enthusiasm. It was simple, often crude, but joyous. It opened up opportunities for music-making (and for some, money-making) to a wide range of mainly young people, who, lacking the ability and/or the opportunities to become a member of a dance band, wanted to make rather than simply listen to popular music. There was also the opportunity to dance, free of the constraint of ballroom rules. Inspired by Lonnie Donegan, and others, there was a proliferation of skiffle groups, most very short-lived, which fed into rock ‘n’ roll and also paved the way for the 1960s beat boom.

Equally important, were the indisputably American origins of songs that were at the heart of skiffle. The Vipers recorded ‘It Takes a Worried Man’ and ‘Pick A Bale of Cotton;’ Chas McDevitt ‘Greenback Dollar’ and ‘Freight Train;’ and Lonnie Donegan ‘Rock Island Line,’ ‘Cumberland Gap’ and ‘Midnight Special.’ Teenagers, who had never even been train-spotting,

sang of 'Casey Jones' and 'The Wreck of the Old 97;' and even of the 'Last Train to San Fernando,' though without realising that it referred to Trinidad rather than California. The novelty of 'white' men singing 'black' music can obscure the fact the skiffle also drew on hill-billy/country traditions, associated with Jimmy Rodgers, Woody Guthrie, Hank Williams and the Carter family, and which had a ready audience in some parts of the country, particularly the 'Nashville of the North' that was Liverpool.

American folk music arrived in a variety of ways. There were informal links, including semi-mythical merchant seamen bringing records into Liverpool. The presence of American troops and access to the American Forces Network (AFN) further broadened interest during and after the war. More specifically, wartime collaboration between the BBC and CBS gave rise to programmes such as the ballad opera, *The Martins and the Coys*, aired in August 1944. A piece of wartime propaganda, the feuding hill-billy families put aside their differences to defeat Hitler. The programme featured Burl Ives, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and Sonny Terry. Guthrie sang 'Nine Hundred Miles' and, in keeping with the overall purpose of the programme, 'All You Fascists Bound to Lose.' The gradual foregrounding of American culture continued in the 1950s. Alan Lomax worked with the BBC on several programmes that embraced blues, trad jazz, English and Irish folk song and calypso. More influentially, Lomax, with his group the Ramblers, became an advocate for skiffle, describing it as 'the people's alternative to Tin Pan Alley.'⁶

If the folk revival was one route to skiffle, trad jazz was another. Skiffle emerged as interval music during concerts, notably by Ken Colyer's jazz band but also Chris Barber's. It helped popularise the music of bluesmen (Lead Belly, Big Bill Broonzy, Muddy Waters, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and Lonnie Johnson) and gospel singers (Sister Rosetta Tharpe).⁷ The break with jazz came in 1955 with Lonnie Donegan's *Backstairs Session*, EP, though he had recorded 'Rock Island Line' a year earlier. This was followed by his rapid rise to prominence with hit records in 1956, such as 'Cumberland Gap,' and 'Gamblin' Man.' In the same year Donegan was booked for a fourteen-week tour on the Moss Empires variety

circuit, which took him to major towns and cities alongside a ventriloquist, comedy cyclists, a calypso pianist and 'Mundy & Earle – A Boy, A Girl and a Gramophone.' As the headliner, he had a 35-minute slot in which he and his group performed 'Wabash Cannonball,' 'Lost John' and 'Nobody's Child' and the inevitable 'Rock Island Line.'⁸ His performances reportedly electrified his audiences and, not just in the case of George Harrison and Paul McCartney, inspired many to take up a guitar and learn three or four chords.

Skiffle was more than a one-man story. Various skiffle groups enjoyed modest commercial success. Wally Whyton and the Vipers, the City Ramblers, Chas McDevitt with Nancy Whiskey, as well as Beryl Bryden and Betty Smith were at the fore. Success was to be measured as much in juke box plays, in milk bars and coffee bars, as in record sales and chart appearances. By the late-1950s there were some 15,000 juke boxes in Britain, with their numbers increasing at 400 a month.⁹ Initially found in fairgrounds and seaside amusement arcades, increasingly they moved onto the high street across the country as they shed their reputation for seediness. Cultural critics, notably Richard Hoggart, had little time for the coffee-bar culture but its popularity among teenagers was beyond dispute.¹⁰ Belatedly the BBC presented a specialist radio programme, *Saturday Skiffle Club*, which regularly featured Chas McDevitt and Johnny Duncan, and later (February 1957) it televised *Six-Five Special*, with its heavy emphasis on skiffle, including amateur performers. Even Billy Cotton felt there was an opportunity in recording Lonnie Donegan's hit, 'Puttin' on the Style.'

More important than chart success – and skiffle never dominated the pop charts – was the upsurge in sales of cheap guitars and the creation of numerous amateur skiffle groups to be heard in youth clubs, church halls, pubs and clubs, at some cinemas and dance halls, especially at record-based lunchtime sessions, and even in school halls.¹¹ Estimates suggest there were between 30,000 and 50,000 skiffle groups in the late-1950s.¹² For every successful amateur or semi-professional skiffle group, performing on a local circuit, there were an unknown number more, who played for pleasure, and a few shillings, on an occasional basis at a garden fete or local carnival.¹³ For the

majority of young men (and it was overwhelmingly young men taking part) it was no more than a leisure-time activity.¹⁴ For a minority it was the start of a career in music. Alexis Korner, a major formative influence when he played with Lonnie Donegan in Ken Colyer's jazz band, moved into electric blues, while Martin Carthy made his reputation (along with Dave Swarbrick) in the English folk revival. The Quarrymen went on (with certain changes in personnel) to become *the* beat group of the 1960s, while the lead singer of the Kool Kats and the guitarist in the Candy Bison skiffle groups, Rod Stewart and Ronnie Woods respectively, went on to highly successful pop careers.

The response to skiffle was varied. The "Skiffle or Piffle" debate, if such it can be called, rumbled on through 1956 and 1957. The trad jazz community was dismissive. Ken Colyer asserted it had 'not produced any worthwhile talent ... and [had] no originality.' Alexis Korner acknowledged its 'commercial success' but dismissed it as 'musically ... mediocre.' Graham Boatfield, writing in the *Jazz Journal* was even more scathing. The Colyer skiffle group was dismissed, in a phrase that combined both musical and racial elitism, as 'a bankrupt pier-show of black-faced minstrels' while class prejudice emerged as Donegan's singing was compared to 'a number of intoxicated hillbillies returning from some over-length orgy.' *Melody Maker* was almost bland in comparison, opining that skiffle is the dreariest rubbish to be inflicted on the British public since the last rash of Al Jolson imitators.¹⁵ To a large extent, the comments reflected the conservatism and insularity of those judging the musical tastes of the young, which was predicated on the belief that dominant popular music of the day was (again) being degraded. Skiffle had its defenders, including Paul Oliver, writing in *Music Mirror*, who saw it as a means to the end of a better knowledge of blues and jazz, and Steve Race, writing in *Melody Maker*, who praised it for encouraging amateur music making – and for keeping worse records out of the charts.¹⁶ Alan Lomax, more perceptively, drew attention to the British antecedents of American folk music as part of skiffle's appeal, as well as praising its participatory nature.¹⁷ Others saw it as relatively harmless, even positive in terms of encouraging active participation, at a time when television

was threatening to encourage yet more passivity. There was also something almost wholesomely British about the leading practitioners. Donegan's singing was enthusiastic and uninhibited. His introductions were funny and there was an endearing cheekiness about his performances. Above all, like Buddy Holly later, there was a simplicity and approachability that gave the impression that he was not that different from his audiences, who could, if they wanted, perform like him. Equally, the more folk-derived sound of Chas McDevitt and Nancy Whiskey had a good-natured and unthreatening quality. Likewise, the Vipers offered the novelty and excitement of American music but with none of the threat that was to be associated with rock 'n' roll, which had arrived in the country at more or less the same time as the skiffle craze took off.¹⁸

Rock 'n' Roll

If skiffle was music played by men born in the 1930s for an audience born in the 1940s.¹⁹ Rock 'n' roll was for and by a new generation; except that Bill Haley was born in 1925 and had enjoyed a lengthy career as a yodelling cowboy before becoming an unlikely founding figure of and ambassador for rock 'n' roll. Rock 'n' roll, as it developed in America, despite its sanitisation and commercialization by the major record companies, was novel and exciting for a young white audience. It was also diverse, drawing on a variety of popular traditions, including country, blues, and gospel. In its first flourishing, c.1955-60, there was no all-embracing formula to capture Haley along with Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochran, Gene Vincent, and the Everly Brothers. Outraged American conservatives, secular and religious, cared little for distinctions and condemned it, not simply as 'a musical eccentricity' but as 'a communicable disease,' threatening, in their eyes at least, both the musical and moral wellbeing of the nation. This commercially-communicable phenomenon aroused hysterical condemnation and adoration in almost equal measure as radio and television stations, along with record and film companies, sought to exploit it to the full. The "cultural contagion" spread across the Atlantic. Rock 'n' roll was given airtime on Radio Luxembourg and AFN, though barely on the BBC Light Programme, and it was played on

the growing number of juke boxes.²⁰ *Blackboard Jungle* brought it to a cinema near you, and record sales literally brought it home for numerous families. Though Elvis never managed more than a brief stop-over at Prestwich, Bill Haley (1957), Jerry Lee Lewis and Buddy Holly (1958), Gene Vincent and Eddy Cochrane (1960), and Little Richard (1962), all toured the country bringing live music to their fans.

The responses to rock 'n' roll were varied and throw light on a country that was still living with the economic and social consequences of the war. For the young (and not so young) the attraction of the music lay in its excitement, its lack of restraint and its promise of something better – at least, more American. Sensationalist press accounts of vandalised cinema seats exaggerated the extent of hooligan behaviour and misrepresented much good-natured exuberance. Nonetheless, for more conservative commentators, here was the embodiment of all that was wrong with 'Americanised' youth: out-of-control teenagers with too much time on their hands, too much money in their pockets and not enough discipline. In the late summer and early autumn of 1956, the so-called *Blackboard Jungle* "riots" began, reaching a peak in September at a showing at the Trocadero cinema in the Elephant and Castle, London.²¹ '[A] fourth-rate film with fifth-rate music,' according to the up-and-coming politician, Jeremy Thorpe, was able to 'pierce the thin shell of civilization and turn people into wild dervishes.'²² The meeting of delinquent youth and degenerate culture sparked a moral panic that led to a series of knee-jerk bans of the film across the country and produced instant judgement on the generation gap that, allegedly, had been exposed. Although the panic in the popular press soon subsided, the announcement of a tour by Bill Haley and His Comets saw the press stoking fears of trouble ahead. In fact, the tour was both successful and largely without incident.²³ In part, this was due to a careful public relations campaign, which stressed the god-fearing, family-orientation of the group. Haley was accompanied by his wife and his manager by his 77-year-old mother. The links with Britain were stressed. Haley's mother came from Ulverston; and he openly professed his love of English literary and musical culture. Haley's friendly, avuncular persona also helped.²⁴ But,

in no small measure, success was due to the excitement about the music that contrasted with the measured reassurance of the dance bands. The very crudeness of the guitar and saxophone breaks gave it a sense of spontaneity. Further, Haley's form of rock 'n' roll had its roots, recognisably, in Western Swing and cowboy music, which already had a following in Britain. Similarly, the jiving, which had given rise to trouble in the inappropriate setting of cinemas showing *Blackboard Jungle*, was nothing new to wartime and post-war generations that had seen the jitterbug evolve into the jive in many dance halls across the country. Finally, and somewhat paradoxically, Haley's on-stage patter and the group's slapstick routines had more in common with that stalwart of the BBC, Billy Cotton and, unsurprisingly appealed across the alleged 'generation gap.' *Stage*, not noted for its sympathetic coverage of American rock 'n' roll, saw Haley and the Comets as 'essentially a comedy outfit meant to be seen as well as heard' and recognised that they were 'certainly calculated to make people happy.'²⁵

If Bill Haley did much to make rock 'n' roll acceptable, and for many of its fans this was not something to be sought, there was no escaping his atypicality: Elvis Presley or Little Richard he was not! The pelvic-thrusting gyrations and smouldering good looks of the former were never let loose on the British public, while the latter's high-energy performance and camp persona was not seen live in Britain until 1962, by which time first-generation, commercialised rock 'n' roll had passed its peak. In 1958 two rock 'n' rollers in their twenties toured Britain. Jerry Lee Lewis was 23, Buddy Holly 22. The contrast between the two was considerable. The bespectacled Holly never lost the wholesome 'boy next door' image and his distinctive guitar style never seemed to be beyond the scope of the enthusiastic amateur. The long-haired, Lewis, with his extravagant, iconoclastic stage act and overt sexuality was something else. His style owed much to his Pentecostal church background, with its emphasis on exuberance, physicality and emotional display. and to an intensity born of a 'Christ-haunted' tension between his personal faith and his public career as a secular musician.²⁶ His high-energy music, notably 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On' and 'Great Balls of Fire' were extremely popular.²⁷ *Stage* conceded that 'lovers of rock 'n'

roll probably appreciated the performance of this man without inhibitions,' but felt others found it 'all very puzzling – and scary.'²⁸ But it was immorality, rather than hedonistic music, that brought the tour to an abrupt end when it was revealed that he was married to his 13-year-old cousin.

In contrast the whirlwind Holly tour, also in 1958, passed without scandal. *Stage* continued its critique of rock 'n' roll performance by noting his 'weird gyrations ... shivering and shaking, jumping and strutting' but noted that his set, which included 'Oh Boy!' 'Peggy Sue' and 'That'll Be the Day,' had 'the teenagers screaming with delight and applauding for more.' To the amazement of one of their correspondents 'The Crickets ... turned out to be lively, entertaining and a little overwhelming.'²⁹ Reports in the provincial press highlighted their popularity with an overwhelmingly young audience.³⁰ The 1960 tour headlined by Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent was, with one exception, incident free. A stage invasion, fist fights in the aisles and destruction of theatre seats in Dundee led both the *Aberdeen Evening Express* and *Stage* to talk of a rock 'n' roll riot but the small-scale disturbance was not repeated elsewhere. Several papers commented on the good-natured enthusiasm of the audience. The *Coventry Evening Telegraph* reassured its readers that there had been 'no frantic scenes' and the audience had 'dispersed for late buses rather than ... waiting to mob their heroes.'³¹ Reports across the country referred, somewhat condescendingly, to "scream-agers", whose noise threatened to drown out the music but recognised their popularity with a young audience in a way that baffled older reporters.

Without touring the country, Elvis Presley was the dominant figure in the American rock 'n' roll invasion, with a stunning number of chart hits in the years before he went into the army. His breakthrough, 'That's Alright (Mama),' was with Sun records, but his commercial success came after his move to RCA. Following 'Heartbreak Hotel,' he had hits with 'Don't Be Cruel,' 'Hound Dog,' 'Blue Suede Shoes,' 'Love Me Tender,' 'All Shook Up,' 'Teddy Bear,' 'Jailhouse Rock' and 'King Creole.' While there can be little doubt about the commodification of Elvis, 'a white man who had the negro sound,' in the words of Sam Phillips, equally there can be little

doubt of his popularity.³² Reports of his stage performances provoked earnest discussion on the BBC Home Service about the peculiar effect this type of music had on the young but it did not stop 'Aunty' giving him some airtime. Nor did it stop Elvis imitators taking to the stage in an attempt to cash in on his popularity.

Unsurprisingly, driven by hard-headed record producers through to wannabe rockers, home-grown 'stars' emerged, trying to cash in on what many thought would be a short-lived craze. It is easy to dismiss English rock 'n' rollers of the late-1950s as pale reflections of their American counterparts, but this is misleading.³³ First, it assumes that Tommy Steele or Cliff Richard simply wanted to be an English Elvis or Little Richard. Second, it overlooks both good British performers, such as Adam Faith and Johnny Kidd and the Pirates, and the saccharine sell-outs, the Bobbys and Johnnys, in the Billboard charts. (Suffice it to say 'Pat Boone' and to remember his pedantic desire to correct Fats Domino's grammar when covering 'Ain't That A Shame'.³⁴) Third, it fails to appreciate how the emergence of amateur rock 'n' roll groups led into the beat boom of the 1960s.

There was always an ambiguity about Tommy Steele. He might have been billed as 'Britain's answer to Elvis Presley,' but he was also 'the boy from Bermondsey.'³⁵ His route to rock 'n' roll came via the country music of Hank Williams and skiffle, though during his years in the merchant navy he became aware of Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly. His dramatic rise to fame owed much to careful management by John Kennedy and Larry Parnes. Like Bill Haley, he was promoted as the wholesome face of rock 'n' roll. His undoubted enthusiasm and affability lent itself to a clean-cut, non-threatening image, at a time when the popular press was happy to link rock 'n' roll with teenage delinquency and immorality.³⁶ The smiling, besweatered Steele constantly played down an suggestion of being (or wishing to be) a sex symbol.³⁷ 'Rock With The Caveman' was the hit that set him on a career that saw him topping the bill at Sunderland Empire, no less, by November 1956. But no-one who listened to the words, let alone saw him perform it on stage, could have missed the element of parody. This was end-of-the -pier entertainment that owed more to

a longer music-hall tradition, as did his born-in-Bermondsey 'cockney' authenticity. Steele, himself, made known his wish to be more than a rock 'n' roll performer and several observers noted at the time that he had 'a talent beyond the ability to satisfy a passing phase' and to become 'a first-class entertainer.'³⁸ His star billing at the 1957 Royal Variety Performance was an important staging post in his career and a reflection of his appeal to a wider audience. His subsequent recording career showed a continued desire to broaden his appeal, with novelty songs such as 'Nairobi' (1958), 'Hiawatha' (1959) and 'Little White Bull' (1959), from the film *Tommy the Toreador*. In 1963 he starred in the West End musical, *Half a Sixpence*, signalling the successful transition he wanted to an all-round entertainer. Nor was he alone in moving into a revived and relocated variety tradition. Lonnie Donegan recorded 'Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavour (On the Bedpost Over Night)?' in 1959 and 'My Old Man's a Dustman' in 1960. Cliff Richard followed a similar career path. 'Move It,' seen by some as authentic rock 'n' roll, had brought condemnation from the *New Musical Express* for his 'violent hip-swinging and crude exhibitionism,' and provoked one television critic to ask: 'Is he too sexy for television?'³⁹ A year later he was appearing in more innocuous form in the film *Expresso Bongo*, intended as a satire but popular with teenage fans taken by the music.⁴⁰ The transformation to a British Ricky Nelson was completed with records such as (the prescient) 'Bachelor Boy' and 'Summer Holiday,' the latter becoming the title song of the film, released in 1963.

It was easy to proclaim the death of rock 'n' roll c.1960. Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran were literally dead, Elvis had been in the army and was creating a new entertainer image and repertoire. Little Richard had (re-)discovered religion – halfway through a tour of Australia – and Jerry Lee Lewis was still struggling to overcome the scandal that ruined his 1958 tour. This is to overlook the extent to which rock 'n' roll was taken up by numerous amateur groups from the mid-1950s onwards. Aided by the publication in 1957 of Bert Weedon's *Play In A Day*, guitar tutor, and the availability of relatively cheap, especially mail order, guitars, amateur performers, in their thousands, had formed skiffle groups, which in turn

spawned rock groups. These were the roots of the 'beat boom' of the 1960s.

Revoltng youth? Continuity and change in 1950s popular music

Skiffle and early rock 'n' roll undoubtedly had a significant impact on the development of popular music in Britain but the extent to which it helped give rise to a distinct youth culture is more debatable. There was an element of incomprehension (feigned or otherwise) on the part of certain older commentators but there is less evidence of a generation gap than one might believe from some commentators.

The shock of a constructed 'black' music, moving from the margins into the 'white' mainstream, so powerful in America, was not experienced to the same extent in Britain. Further, entrepreneurs and impresarios adopted charm offensives, distancing themselves and their proteges from riotous images in favour of a more acceptable boy-next-door demeanour; and this was reflected in the lyrics of the songs. Behind the problems of 'Wake Up, Little Susie' (failing to get home on time from the movies) or 'Fool's Paradise' (the disappointment of those blinded by love) was a desire for love and matrimony. It was no coincidence that 'Peggy Sue got married not long ago.' Even Marty Wilde, singing 'Bad Boy,' was complaining about being misunderstood. The bad boy was only 'a good boy in love,' and who could condemn that? This was reinforced by the known wishes of Tommy Steele and Cliff Richard to broaden their appeal as family entertainers. There was a further factor. The new music was not quite as shocking as some suggested. There was a pre-existing audience for American popular music, from the wartime bands, jitterbugging and jiving, to the country and cowboy music of the 1950s, which found in rock 'n' roll, particularly that of Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers, a recognisable and enjoyable musical form. They might not have gone to the Southampton Gaumont, the Stockton Globe or the Wigan Ritz – that was for their kids – but parents were happy to listen to a local group singing 'That'll Be The Day' and 'Bye, Bye Love' in their local pub or club.

Popular music changed in important ways in the second half of the 1950s but there were also elements of continuity. 1956 saw Lonnie Donegan enjoying great success with

'Rock Island Line' and Elvis had his first top-ten chart hit with 'Heartbreak Hotel' but Anne Shelton was more widely popular as she exhorted her soldier sweetheart to 'Lay Down Your Arms (And Surrender to Mine).' Ruby Murray ('Softly, Softly'), Tony Bennett ('Stranger in Paradise') and Jimmy Young ('Unchained Melody') all had number 1 hits with records that owed little to the new musical crazes. Even during 1959, when Elvis, Buddy Holly and Cliff Richard topped the charts, so too did Jane Morgan ('The Day That the Rains Came Down'), Shirley Bassey ('As I Love You') and Bobby Darin ('Mack the Knife'). And then there was Sheb Wooley's 'Purple People Eater,' demonstrating the enduring appeal of the nonsense song.⁴¹ A similar picture emerges from the best-selling album charts. Lonnie Donegan, Bill Haley and Tommy Steele all reached number one; but so too did Nat 'King' Cole. Elvis had four number one albums, as did Frank Sinatra. The most successful albums in the late 1950s were film musicals. *Carousel*, *Oklahoma* and *The King and I* in 1956; *West Side Story* 1957, *My Fair Lady* and *South Pacific* in 1958.⁴²

Some concluding observations

Skiffle and rock 'n' roll brought distinctively new sounds to popular music in the 1950s. They offered a clear alternative to the dance bands and crooners, but rarely dominated the pop charts, let alone album sales and the wider world of popular music. Further, many of the stars of 'first generation' British skiffle and rock 'n' roll followed a route into popular entertainment that would have been familiar to George Formby or Gracie Fields, while their successors appeared bland. Nonetheless, a new generation of record-buying consumers, as likely to buy cheap cover copies from Woolworths as the more expensive originals, emerged and laid the base for the revival of the record industry that was struggling to recover from the collapse of sales that dated back to the 1930s. More importantly, the late 1950s saw an upsurge in popular music-making. Do-it-yourself instruments were at the heart of skiffle. Cheap guitars and a Bert Weedon tutor facilitated the explosion in amateur rock 'n' roll bands, experimenting with a variety of new musical forms, many from America. This was the seed bed from which the British beat boom was to emerge and to which we turn next.

Endnotes

- 1 Denis Mitchell, producer of the BBC's *Ballads and Blues*, aired in 1953, spoke of 'folk singers and jazz musicians find[ing] a common platform in modern and traditional folk music from both sides of the Atlantic.' <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/45bb2079d7bc466d8324c3e0c4e916a9>
- 2 P Tagg, 'Open letter: 'Black music,' Afro-American music' and 'European music,' *Popular Music*, 8(3), 1989, pp.285-98, esp. conclusion p.295. Tagg was referring specifically to America but the point also applies to Britain. Contrast with Bradley who, talking of 'codal fusion,' refers to a 'European code' with an emphasis on harmony, based on triadic chords, rather than rhythm and even melody and in which improvisation is rare and the 'distinct and separate ... Afro-American code' is characterised by, among other things, an emphasis on rhythm, including rhythmic variation, blue notes, the use of call and response and improvisation. D Bradley, *Understanding Rock 'n' Roll: Popular Music in Britain, 1955-1964*, 1992, chapter 3. Tagg rejects the 'supposed pair of opposites "black" or "Afro-American music" versus "European music,' claiming that in musicological terms the key elements of the former (rhythm, blue notes, call and response and improvisation) are not unique to 'black' music. Bradley makes clear that he does not believe in a 'pure Africanism at the fountainhead of everything' but appears to reject the notion that Afro-American music was already a form of codal fusion.
- 3 See also the flurry of publications giving advice on child-rearing and parenthood, including Dr B Spock, *Baby and Child Care*, 1946 and J Bowlby, *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, 1953
- 4 In 1931 in England and Wales there were 3.4 million people aged between 15 and 19. This figure was not exceeded until the mid-1960s when the estimates for 1966 showed 3.7 million people in this age category. As a percentage of the total population, 15-19-year-olds were a larger segment of society (8.5 per cent) in 1931 than 1966 (8 per cent). B R Mitchell & P Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics*, Cambridge University Press, 1962, p.13 and B R Mitchell & H G Jones, *Second Abstract of British Historical Statistics*, Cambridge University Press, 1971, p.6.
- 5 D Kynaston, *Family Britain, 1951-57*, 2009 pp.379-80. S Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, 1972 is the classic study of the latter disturbances. The reality was far less melodramatic and there were contemporary commentators who painted a more nuanced and favourable picture. See for example, Hilda Marchant 'The Truth about the "Teddy Boys"' in *Picture Post* cited in Kynaston, *Family Britain*, p.381
- 6 In 1957 he published *The Skiffle Album, featuring Skiffle and Folk Songs popularised by Alan Lomax and the Ramblers*, which contained a wide range of songs, American, British, old, and new.
- 7 M Dewe, *The Skiffle Craze*, Aberystwyth, Planet, 1998, esp. chapter 1.
- 8 B Bragg, *Roots, Radicals and Rockers: How Skiffle Changed the World*, London, Faber & Faber, 2017, p.267
- 9 A Horn, *Juke box Britain: Americanisation and youth culture, 1945-60*, Manchester University Press, 2009, p.62 and p.169

- 10 R Hoggart, *The Use of Literacy*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1957, especially 'The Juke Box Boys,' chapter 8 part A.
- 11 For a more detailed account of the growth of skiffle in northern cities see, J P Watson, "'Beats Apart": A Comparative History of Youth Culture and Popular Music in Liverpool and Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, 1965-1965,' unpublished Ph.D., University of Northumbria, 2009, chapter 4 'Popular Music in the North of England.' £10 was relatively cheap for a guitar in the mid-1950s but still a considerable sum of money for many, equivalent to at least £200 today. Mail order guitars cost as little as £6 6s (c.£125)
- 12 Bragg, *Roots, Radicals and Rockers*, p.303 but no source is given.
- 13 See Dewe, *Skiffle Craze*, chapter 6 and Bragg, *Roots, Radicals and Rockers* refers to an estimate of 'between thirty and fifty thousand active skiffle groups at the height of the craze in 1957,' p.303
- 14 Both Neil Kinnock and Michael Howard were reportedly in skiffle groups in their teens, as was Max Clifford, a singer and guitarist in the now-forgotten Dominoes. Dewe, *Skiffle Craze*, p.134
- 15 Quotations taken from Bragg, *Roots, Radicals and Rockers*, p.190 and p.305. Bragg does not give full references.
- 16 Bragg, *Roots, Radicals and Rockers*, p.191 and *Melody Maker*, 2 March 1957 cited in Dewe, *Skiffle Craze*, p. 129
- 17 A Lomax, 'Skiffle: why is it so popular?' *Melody Maker* 31 August 1957 cited in Dewe, *Skiffle Craze*, p. 131
- 18 It appears to have escaped public notice that the group took their name from Raymond Thorp's 1956 novella, *Viper: The Confessions of a Drug Addict*.
- 19 Lonnie Donegan was born in 1931, Chas McDevitt in 1934 and Wally Whyton in 1929.
- 20 There were very few outright bans but, by the use of green labelling, the BBC severely restricted airtime for rock 'n' roll. S Barnard, *On The Radio: Music Radio in Britain*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1989, p.37
- 21 To a large extent the 'riots' were the product of sensationalist press coverage. While there were incidents of damage to cinema seats, there was more exuberant dancing, inside and outside of cinemas.
- 22 Cited in Kynaston, *Family Britain*, p.655. Bill Haley and His Comets dominated the soundtrack of the film, particularly the opening track, 'Rock Around the Clock' and 'See You Later Alligator,' which played a key part in the unfolding of the story. In addition there were two songs by the Platters ('Only You' and 'The Great Pretender') and two by Freddie Bell and the Bell Boys ('Teach you to Rock' and the highly subversive 'Giddy Up a Ding Dong!')
- 23 G A Mitchell, 'Reassessing 'the Generation Gap': Bill Haley's 1957 Tour of Britain, Inter-Generational Relations and Attitudes to Rock 'n' Roll in the Late 1950s,' *Twentieth British History*, 24(4), 2013, pp.537-605
- 24 Haley had been involved in controversy in America when he was targeted by followers of the notorious white supremacist, Asa Carter. Mitchell, 'Reassessing' p.583
- 25 *Stage*, 14 March 1957
- 26 The same tension was true of Little Richard. See C Mosher, 'Ecstatic Sounds: The Influence of Pentacostalism on Rock n Roll,' *Popular Music and Society*,

- 31(1), 2008, pp.95-112, C Motley, 'Hell Hounds, Hillbillies and Hedonists: The Evangelical Roots of Rock 'n' Roll,' *Religions*, 2016, [http:// www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/Contemporary-Culture and R J Stephens](http://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/Contemporary-Culture%20and%20R%20J%20Stephens), "Where else did they copy their style but from church groups?" Rock 'n' Roll and Pentacostalism in the 1950s South,' *Church History*, 85(1), 2016, pp.97-131
- 27 Both were recorded on the Sun label. Lewis also recorded country numbers such as 'Fools Like Me' and Hank Williams' 'You Win Again', though with distinctive piano breaks. His career did not recover from the scandal for another four years, though he continued recording with Sun throughout
- 28 *Stage* 29 May 1958. Their reporter seemed as much concerned with his 'weird antics,' noting he 'frequently combed his long wavy blond hair, pulled his socks up and scratched himself.'
- 29 *Stage* 6 March and 3 April 1958. *Stage* also referred on several occasion to the successful home-grown talent in the show – Des O'Connor.
- 30 For example, *Newcastle Journal*, 7 March and *Mexborough and Swinton Times*, 22 March 1958
- 31 *Aberdeen Evening Express* 22 February, *Stage* 25 February and *Coventry Evening Telegraph* 29 January 1960
- 32 D Harker, *One For The Money: Politics and Popular Song*, Hutchinson, London, 1980, chapter 3 'Thank God for Elvis Presley?' It is also the case that this boom provided openings for the likes of Fats Domino and Ray Charles.
- 33 See for example, Barnard, *On The Radio*, p.34
- 34 It is claimed that Boone wanted to record it as 'Isn't that a shame.' The anecdote may be inaccurate but there is no doubt that Boone presented white America with a range of acceptable covers, as to his credit, he now freely confesses.
- 35 *Stage*, 31 January 1957
- 36 This involved, among other things, highly publicised meetings with (alleged) debutantes.
- 37 Colin McInnes famously described him as 'every nice young girl's boy, every kid's favourite elder brother, every mother's cherished adolescent son.' Cited in G A M Mitchell, 'A Very 'British' Introduction to Rock 'n' Roll: Tommy Steele and the Advent of Rock 'n' Roll Music in Britain, 1956-1960,' *Contemporary British History*, 25(20), 2011, pp.205-225 at p.215
- 38 *Melody Maker* 22 December 1956 and *Stage* 23 May 1957
- 39 D Kynaston, *Modernity Britain, 1957-1962*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p.194
- 40 The film, which was based on a stage play, featured several songs by Cliff Richard, an instrumental piece by The Shadows but also two traditional airs – 'Loch Lomond' and 'The Irish Washerwoman.' Its satirical message appears to have been lost on celluloid.
- 41 Strictly speaking, 'Purple People Eater' was released in 1958 and was also recorded by Judy Garland in the same year.
- 42 Other successful albums include 'Pal Joey' and 'High Society' but also 'The Duke Wore Jeans.'