

Any old way you use it,  
It's gotta be rock'n' roll music,  
If you wanna dance with me.

— Chuck Berry, "Rock'n' Roll Music"

**H**EADY days, that first lindy era of rock. In retrospect it is astonishing how fast it happened. Early rock is replete with instant success stories like Chuck Berry's: complete unknowns making smash hits their first time in a studio. Which means that the music filled a gargantuan need that neither artist nor audience knew existed. Rock's excitement in 1954-55-56 was that of love at first sight. Some date rock back to Fats Domino's first million seller ("The Fat Man") in 1948, or even to "Open the Door, Richard" in 1946; the music does go back that far, but it really became rock'n' roll when it met its response. Neither music nor phenomenon alone, rock'n' roll is a mass sensibility.

That sensibility not only came from nowhere and spread everywhere, but was so natural to those who shared it that it was impossible to explain. Non-believers made comic hay of the tongue-tied rock star and the girls who could only shriek "Eeeeeie I love him!" when asked why they loved Elvis. But how else to say it? Fifteen years ago you couldn't say why you loved rock'n' roll, not only because you didn't know why (and you didn't), but also because maybe you didn't dare. And maybe "they" couldn't understand your love for the same reason. For that sensibility was not just sensuality, speed, and rebellion, but also black — how much still isn't clear, but more black than anyone was willing to admit in 1955. The rock'n' roll sensibility meant that on some level white kids who were trying to find their own identity were identifying passionately with black music, doing it barely consciously but therefore without any self-conscious distance. And not just identifying passively, but creating a new identity between white and black.

The medium of the process was the music, which from the first was a racial and musical hybrid. "Blues plus country equals rock" is a cliché inadequate to express rock's heritage or its sharing. Rock was willing to use almost every kind of American music known. Little Richard emerged as a star for white teenagers straight from a black gospel show biz that until then few whites knew existed. The Platters, on the other hand, were a very funky version of the Mills Brothers and the Inkspots, who had long been popular with whites. Elvis was tremendously influenced by blues singers (he had been one of those kids in the white spectator section), but he added a white punk sexuality all his own. His "Hound Dog" had first been done by Big Mama Willie Mae Thornton, but it had in turn been written for her by two white kid song writers from New York, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. Carl Perkins' "Blue Suede Shoes" was the first record ever to top the rhythm and blues (black) and popular (white) charts at the same time. All the stars, white and black, toured together, and heard and were influenced by each other's music.

In short, a black-white music and white kids who said, "Yeah, that's how I feel". That was rock'n' roll. You often didn't know if it was white or black; it just had to have a beat so you could dance to it. Not that race had disappeared, not at all, but white kids had started to go to the same shows as blacks, to listen to the same music, and to love it for the same reasons — because it was funny and sexy and strong and lifted you up to a place where you knew that being a square from dullsville was a lot less than what you could be if you kept on rockin'. However inarticulate, it was a perception new enough that nervous adults said it was lewd, possibly a Communist plot, and caused riots; or, alternatively, they took pains to dismiss it as a silly fad. And they did indeed have something to fear; rock'n' roll was the beginning, however tentative, of a mass state of mind (if not way of life) beyond race in America. If only while they danced, those outrageous rock'n' rollers, in pink and black peg pants, toreadors and pin curls, were integrated Americans.

No one fully grasped what was happening, but Chuck Berry seemed to have an idea. Of all the musicians, he was the one who best recognized these new American kids, and he loved and encouraged them. With an extraordinary leap of empathy, he knew and expressed their feelings, and they understood themselves through him. His songs were hymns to a generation; he was a black poet singing the praises of being free, black/white and under 21.

He got it all, the whole cast of characters, their every plight and possibility. There was "Sweet Little Sixteen"...



The white youth of today have begun to react to the fact that the "American Way of Life" is a fossil of history. What do they care if their old baldheaded and crew-cut elders don't dig their caveman mops? They couldn't care less about the old stiffassed honkies who don't like their new dances.... All they know is that it feels good to swing to way-out body-rhythms instead of dragassing across the dance floor like zombies to the dead beat of mind-smothered Mickey Mouse music.... To the youth, the elders are Ugly Americans; to the elders, the youth have gone mad.

— Eldridge Cleaver, "The White Race and Its Heroes," Soul on Ice

She's got the grown up blues,  
Tight dresses and lipstick,  
She's sportin' high-heel shoes,  
Oh, but tomorrow morning,  
She'll have to change her trend.  
Be sweet sixteen,  
And back in class again.  
And her parents...  
Oh, Mummy, Mummy,  
Please may I go,  
It's such a sight to see,  
Somebody steal the show,  
Oh, Daddy, Daddy,  
I beg of you,  
Whisper to Mummy,  
It's all right with you.

— "Sweet Little Sixteen"

And the typical teen...

Yeah, I'm doing all right in school,  
They ain't said I've broke no rule,  
I ain't never been in dutch,  
I don't browse around too much,  
Don't bother me, leave me alone,  
Anyway — I'm almost grown.

— "Almost Grown"

And high school romance...

I remember so well,  
Back when the weather was cool,  
We used to have so much fun,

When we were walking to school,  
If we stopped off to hear  
The latest songs they sing,  
We'd just make it in  
Before the bells would ring.

"Oh Baby Doll"

He knew the drag of stupid jobs...  
Working in the filling station,  
Too many tasks —  
Wipe the windows,  
Check the tires,  
Check the oil,  
"Dollar gas!"  
Ahhh,  
Too much monkey business  
For me to be involved in it.

"Too Much Monkey Business"

And cars, cars, that could fly, cars to cruise in,  
neck in, speed in, listen to rock in, and cars of pure  
fantasy, like the one he demanded in "No Money Down"....  
Well, Mister, I want a yellow convertible,  
Fo' Do' de ville  
With a continental spare  
And wire chrome wheels;  
I want power steering,  
And power brakes,  
I want a powerful motor,  
With jet off-take;  
I want air condition,