



Rock 'n' Roll

What was youth culture like in the 1950s?

The teenagers of the 1950s became known as the "silent generation," because so many of them seemed unconcerned about racial integration, the threat of nuclear war, and other serious social and political problems in the world. Some claimed that this generation seemed concerned only with becoming successful and getting their piece of the American pie. Though these claims may be true in part, many teenagers of the period did question the values of mainstream society. While a few turned to the beat movement to express their beliefs, many teenagers who rebelled against society did so by listening to rock 'n' roll music. It served as the major unifying force for the baby boomers who sought independence from their parents and authority figures in general.

• Rock 'n' roll borrowed from other forms of music, especially African American rhythm and blues, which featured a strong backbeat and loud vocals. The main instruments of rhythm and blues music were saxophones, pianos, electric guitars, and drums. This type of music became popular in northern cities as African Americans moved there from the South.

• In many northern cities, white disc jockeys helped popularize African American rhythm and blues among white teenagers by playing it during radio broadcasts. The term "rock 'n' roll" was popularized by the Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed.

• Rock 'n' roll received wide exposure in the movies, beginning with the film *Blackboard Jungle*, which featured Bill Haley and the Comets singing their hit "Rock Around the Clock." Elvis Presley, who soon became the most popular rock 'n' roll singer, starred in 33 motion pictures.

• Rock 'n' roll was not held back by the racial barriers that segregated other parts of American culture. Although rhythm and blues had previously been played on radio stations targeting an African American audience, black musicians Chuck Berry and Little Richard released rock 'n' roll records in 1956 that were played on radio stations that played to all audiences.

Performances and songs by these artists were also featured in movies. Ritchie Valens, a musician of Hispanic descent, was featured in several variety shows.

• Rock 'n' roll soon became established as the music of America's youth. Magazines and newspapers did feature articles on the music and its stars, and many radio stations switched to a rock 'n' roll format.

How did many adults react to rock 'n' roll?

Not everyone welcomed this new music. Many parents looked at rock 'n' roll with horror and called it "senseless noise." Adults objected to the effect it had on teenagers. One psychiatrist claimed that rock 'n' roll listeners were put in a "prehistoric rhythmic trance," and the music was accused of causing immoral behavior. In addition, many white adults did not like to see

black and white teenagers interacting while listening to the music. Some communities passed laws against playing rock 'n' roll at parties, and rock 'n' roll records were smashed in public ceremonies. Due to pressure placed on radio stations by parents, some disc jockeys were fired simply for playing rock 'n' roll. This adult reaction tended to unify many teenage baby boomers in their love of rock 'n' roll as something that belonged only to them, something they didn't have to share with their parents or other authority figures.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Directions: Answer each question in the space provided.

1. Who was Alan Freed?

2. What music influenced rock 'n' roll?

3. Why did parents object to rock 'n' roll?

4. Besides entertainment, what purpose did rock 'n' roll serve for teenagers?

The Zoot Suit Riots Against Mexican Americans

Read this passage and answer the questions that follow.

It was World War II, and millions of American men were in the armed forces. Some were stationed in the port city of Los Angeles, California. During this time, Japanese Americans on the Pacific Coast were moved to internment camps. Discrimination against other groups, especially Mexican Americans, then started to rise.

Mexican Americans living in Los Angeles faced prejudice nearly everywhere. They were not allowed in certain restaurants, public swimming pools, parks, theaters, and even some schools. Learning a trade or working in the defense industry was out of the question for Mexican Americans. This was true even though President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which outlawed job discrimination in industries that had contracts from the federal government. Kept out of most industries, Mexican Americans found it nearly impossible to work anywhere except in the low-paying jobs.

Los Angeles newspapers fueled prejudice against Mexican Americans as well. The newspapers highlighted crimes or conflicts involving Mexican Americans whom they labeled "zoot suiters." Zoot suits were popular clothing among young Mexican American men. They wore long jackets with wide lapels, baggy pants with tight cuffs, long key chains, and wide-brimmed hats. The zoot suit first became popular with African American teenagers in New York City's Harlem section, then traveled across the country to become a fad among young Mexican Americans.

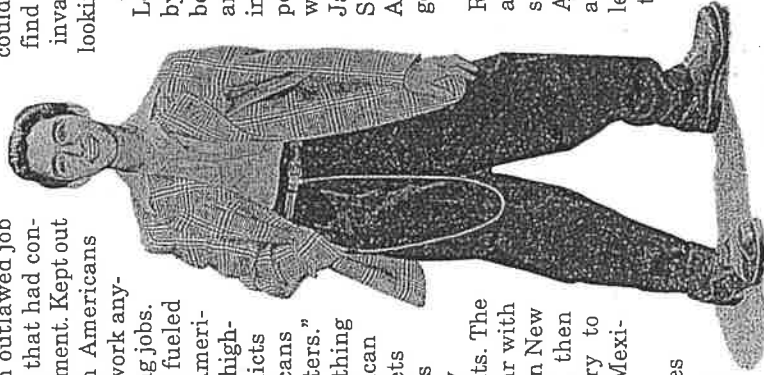
Many whites in Los Angeles began to assume that only troublemakers wore zoot suits. Then a rumor spread

that a sailor had been beaten up by Mexican Americans in zoot suits. On the evening of June 4, 1943, Los Angeles exploded into full-scale riots as a mob of white sailors and other servicemen began an attack on Mexican American men.

The Zoot Suit Riots, as the attacks came to be called, lasted several days. Los Angeles police stood by and did nothing as the sailors and civilians began what some termed "a clean-up campaign." Whenever the sailors saw young Mexican American men in zoot suits, they ripped up the Mexican Americans' clothing, and beat them up. Not only did they assault zoot suiters, but any Mexican American man they could catch. When they could not find them on the streets, they invaded places like movie houses looking for victims.

As the chaos continued, the Los Angeles police responded by arresting several severely beaten Mexican Americans and charging them with rioting. One Los Angeles newspaper announced their arrest with the headlines "44 Zooters Jailed in Attacks on Sailors." Soon, Filipinos and African Americans also became targets of mob attacks.

The violence of the Zoot Suit Riots came to an end only after the federal government stepped in and declared Los Angeles off limits to the armed forces. The Los Angeles City Council's final reaction to the mob violence was to outlaw the wearing of zoot suits. Order had been restored, but at the price of human rights.



Zoot Suiter

1. What kind of prejudice did Mexican Americans face during the time of World War II?

2. What was a zoot suit, and who wore it?

3. How did Los Angeles newspapers influence public opinion about Mexican Americans and zoot suits?

4. What started the Zoot Suit Riots? Who were the rioters, and what action did they take against Mexican Americans?

5. How did the Los Angeles police respond to the rioting?

6. **Critical Thinking** Do you think that the Los Angeles City Council's decision to ban zoot suits was an appropriate response to the riots? Why or why not?