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Why 1955? Explaining the advent of rock music

RICHARD A. PETERSON

At the time, 1929, 1939, 1945 and 1968 all seemed important turning points in the track of our civilisation. By contrast, as anyone alive at the time will attest, 1955 seemed like an unexceptional year in the United States at least. Right in the middle of the 'middle-of-the-road' years of the Eisenhower presidency, 1955 hardly seemed like the year for a major aesthetic revolution. Yet it was in the brief span between 1954 and 1956 that the rock¹ aesthetic displaced the jazz-based aesthetic in American popular music. Frank Sinatra, Tommy Dorsey, Patty Page, Perry Como, Nat King Cole, Tony Bennett, Kay Starr, Les Paul, Eddie Fisher, Jo Stafford, Frankie Lane, Johnnie Ray and Doris Day gave way on the popular music charts to Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, The Platters, Bill Haley, Buddy Holly, Little Richard, Carl Perkins and the growing legion of rockers.²

Looking back at the mid-1950s, it is arguable that rock, its aesthetic and its associated culture did more to shape the political and social events of the times than *vice-versa*.³ If rock did not emerge spontaneously out of the *Zeitgeist* of the mid-1950s, then what did give rise to rock and why did it emerge so abruptly in this brief period? Singly or in combination, three influences have most often been cited. These include the arrival of creative individuals, in particular, Elvis Presley; changes in the composition of the audience, particularly the large numbers of young people born after the Second World War – the baby-boomers; and the transformation of the commercial culture industry, that elaborate array of elements including the phonograph record industry, radio and television broadcasting.

Employing the 'production of culture' perspective (Peterson 1976, 1979), we will show the essential contributions of the culture industry to the emergence of rock music and its associated aesthetic and culture. Before beginning this central task, however, we will briefly explore the roles of creators and audiences in the process.

It is easy to characterise eras in terms of the leaders of the time. The 'Napoleonic' era is an obvious case in point. It is no less tempting to identify an aesthetic revolution with its most celebrated exponents – Vivaldi, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Picasso. In this vein, it is possible to point to specific individuals like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis and say that rock emerged in the late 1950s because, like other creative circles of artists (Kadushin 1976), they began their creative efforts at this specific moment. In bringing into question this 'supply side' explanation, I do not, for a moment belittle their accomplishments. Rather, I suggest that in any era there is a much larger number of creative individuals than ever reach notoriety, and if some specific periods of time see the emergence of more notables, it is because these are times when the usual routinising inhibitions to innovation do not operate as systematically, allowing opportunities for innovators to emerge.⁴

If, as we are suggesting, Presley and the rest did not cause the rock revolution,

but simply took advantage of the opportunities that became available to them, and if the supply of potentially creative people regularly outnumbers the demand, it is tempting to ask who then would have emerged into the limelight as the creative leaders of the new music if it had emerged at an earlier time. What if the year had been 1948 rather than 1954? A number of accomplished black rhythm and blues performers who come to mind, most notably T-Bone Walker and Louis Jordan. (Shaw 1987; Dance 1988; George 1988). Would the whites have come from jazz or from country music? Probably some would have come from each of these traditions, but who would have been the Elvis Presley? Perhaps Hank Williams, but more likely this strikingly handsome mama's boy of 1948 would never have become a professional musician. Rather, he would probably have dropped out of school to drive a truck, then served with the Army in Korea, and saved enough money to buy a beer joint.⁵

What of the 'demand-side' explanation of the emergence of rock music? As applied to this instance, it says the remarkably large cohort of newly-affluent young people, the vanguard of the 'baby-boom' could not relate to the jazz-based sensuous slow dance music created for twenty-year-olds approaching the age of first marriage. Characteristically, songs in this vein featured a male who abstractly promises marriage if the female is willing to share her sexual favours.

The baby-boomers demanded music that spoke to their own condition. The appropriate themes included a mix of the excruciating joys of first love, fights with parents, and frustrations with high school and the older generation generally. Although it can be argued that the uniquely large baby-boom cohort has been responsible for a number of changes in the US, it did not cause the emergence of rock in the mid-1950s. In fact, it could not have done so. After all, in 1954 the oldest of the baby-boomers were only nine years old and half had not even been born yet!

Although the emergence of rock was not caused by the baby-boom, we are not arguing that audience preferences had nothing to do with the rise of rock. Quite to the contrary, the newly affluent teens and pre-teens comprised the heart of the market exploited in the rise of rock music. The point is that this market demand had been growing gradually for over a decade and remained largely unsatiated because the decision-makers in the culture industry simply did not recognise that it was there (Peterson and Berger 1975).

It is, indeed, ironic that the commercial culture industry, which is consecrated to making money by providing the mass of people with the kinds of entertainment that they want, was systematically blind to the unsatiated demand for cultural products that spoke more directly to the condition of young people. In unravelling this irony, we will argue that it was the structure of arrangements, habits, and assumptions of the commercial culture industry itself that caused the blindness. Likewise, we will argue that it was the systematic change in these factors that created the opportunity for rock to emerge.

Work in the production-of-culture perspective has identified six kinds of factors that shape the sorts of symbols that can emerge. These include law, technology, industry structure, organisation structure, occupational career and market. These have been called 'constraints' in earlier work, but this word will be avoided here because its use has unintentionally led to the idea that the six forces so named only limit or hold back creative forces, but they can also stimulate change. For extensive examples of how they work in the production of popular culture and literature, see Peterson (1982; 1985).

In the exposition that follows, we will discuss each of the six in turn, beginning with law and technology, the two that seem to have an effect over the greatest length of time, and, in large part, define the context in which the others operate. We will then conclude by seeing the effect of the six operating together in concert.

Law and regulation

Copyright law, patent law and Federal Government regulation of radio station broadcasting licenses importantly influenced the advent of rock music though in ways completely unintended and unanticipated as well. To begin to understand why rock became a mass success in 1955 we have to go right back to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Copyright

The US Copyright Law of 1909 for the first time gave protection to the owners of musical compositions. Heretofore, American sheet music printer-p publishers had subsisted primarily by reprinting standard favourite songs and appropriating contemporary works by European composers who received no royalties for their use. Writer-p publishers of new songs had lobbied aggressively for the copyright protection the new law would provide because it clearly made a song into a piece of property that could be bought, sold and developed by its owner. With copyright protection, the aggressive New York sheet-music writer-p publishers could afford to spend a great deal of money promoting a new song because other printers could not pirate the valuable properties thus created. Their activity fostered a quick succession of innovations in music and popular dancing, most notably ragtime and jazz.

Unlike the European laws of the time (Ploman and Hamilton 1980; Frith 1981, 1988), the new American law also mandated that song-owners should be compensated for the use of their music in all public places such as concert halls, dance halls, and restaurants. Though wide-sweeping in its coverage, the law provided no mechanism for collecting these royalties from the thousands of places where music was publicly performed. In 1914 a number of the new music writer-p publishers banded together and formed ASCAP, a private membership company, to collect the royalties for public performance. As Ryan (1985) and Sanjek (1988) show in detail, ASCAP was not very successful in its early years, but by the 1930s it effectively controlled access to exposing new music to the public. It did this by, in effect, mandating that only ASCAP licenced music could be played in Broadway musicals, performed on the radio, and incorporated into movies. As late as 1950 an oligopoly of just eighteen publishers determined which songs could reach the public ear (Ryan 1985, p. 104).

These oligopolists shared an aesthetic which accented well-crafted, abstract love themes, strong melodies and muted jazz rhythms and harmonies. 'Tea For Two', 'Stardust' and 'Always' come to mind as exemplars of this aesthetic. But the point for our story is not whether they were good or bad, but that they and the innumerable less memorable songs like them were the only songs that Americans could hear through the dominant media of dissemination. The work of black musicians in the blues, jazz, r&b, and what later came to be called soul genres was systematically excluded, as were the songs in the developing Latin and country

music traditions, as Ryan (1985) shows with numerous specific examples. The effect was that these forms could not reach a wide audience.

In 1939 the radio networks, in a dispute with ASCAP over the increased licencing fees ASCAP wanted to charge, formed a rival licencing agency, BMI. BMI offered inducements to ASCAP publishers and songwriters to defect. Few did, and so BMI signed numerous publishers and writers that had been excluded from membership in ASCAP. Many of these worked in the jazz, Latin, r&b and country music traditions. When in 1940 ASCAP failed to come to terms with the networks over the use-fees to be paid for music, all ASCAP-licenced songs were excluded from radio airplay, and BMI songs, and the genres they they represented, for the first time gained widespread public exposure (Ryan 1985). Even after ASCAP came to terms with the radio networks, the latter still welcomed BMI-licenced songs. Now for the first time it became possible to make a living as a songwriter or publisher in these alternative genera⁶ that in fusing formed the foundations of the rock aesthetic. But rock did not break out in 1942. ASCAP came to terms with the networks, and all those with a vested interest in the older swing and crooner pop music worked hard to keep that aesthetic ascendant in the marketplace (Ryan 1985; Sanjek 1988). A number of other factors described below needed to change before rock could break out.

Patent law

The application of patent law is another of those factors that influenced the timing of rock's emergence. From the inception of the industry before the turn of the twentieth century, the major phonograph record companies battled over alternative music recording and reproducing technologies in hopes of garnering the lion's share of the consumer market. By 1930 the 10-inch 78 rpm shellac disc had become the standard, but CBS and RCA laboratories experimented with the size of the disc, the distance between grooves, and the speed of the record in hopes of greatly increasing the amount of music that could be put on a record. While numerous advances were made, and patents registered, the long-playing record was not introduced in the 1930s because, it is said, the record industry was so depressed due to the Great Depression that consumers would not have paid the price for the new players and records (Metz 1975; Sanjek 1988).

Following the Second World War, Columbia records began intensive experimentation to develop a long-playing high-fidelity record. A newly-developed vinyl material was used for the discs because it held the musical fidelity better than the older shellac. In 1948 Columbia was ready to release its 12-inch, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm LP. Demonstrating its invention to arch-rival RCA, Columbia offered to share all information so an industry standard could be established. According to Metz (1975), General Sarnoff, long-time head of RCA was appalled that the much smaller firm had bested his research department. He refused the offer and ordered his engineers to quickly bring to market an alternative system for the high fidelity play of classical music. Their response was the 7-inch vinyl record with the large hole in the middle that played at 45 rpm.

The 'battle of the record speeds' went on for several years, by which time there were millions of record players on the market that were capable of playing both speeds, and 78s as well. The battle of the speeds was finally resolved when, through government mediation, the rivals agreed to pool their patents and produce records

in both new formats. By 1952, the LP had become the medium for classical music and the 45 the format for popular single records for radio airplay, jukeboxes and retail sales (Sanjek 1988),

The 45 was important to the advent of rock primarily because it was (virtually) unbreakable. One of the great expenses of 78s was the extreme care that had to be taken in handling and shipping them, and each of the major record companies developed a national distribution system that was geared to handling its own delicate 78s. The small record companies could not afford the costs of the national distribution of 78s, and there being no independent distribution companies, it was virtually impossible for a small company in 1948 to have a national hit record. The smaller, lighter, virtually indestructible 45s made it much cheaper to ship records in bulk, making feasible the development of independent national distribution companies. As importantly for the promotion of new songs, it also made it practical for small record companies to use the mail service to send promotional copies to radio stations.

FCC regulation

A number of local, state and federal government regulatory agencies arguably influenced the advent of rock, but the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) played a vital role. Among other things, the FCC regulates the number and allocation of broadcasting stations throughout the US. During the 1930s, when the interest in radios was growing rapidly and virtually every American home had a set, the FCC restricted the number of stations licenced to each market to three to five. This meant that each of the established networks, NBC (with its Red and Blue Networks), CBS and Mutual had an outlet, and there might be one independent station. A large number of applications for new stations were submitted, but these were denied or deferred 'in the public interest' because the networks lobbied successfully to maintain this small number of stations. When the War came, all requests were deferred. It was reasoned that scarce electronic material could not be spared from the war effort to build transmitters.

All this changed in 1947 when the FCC began to approve most of the backlog of applications, and, in a matter of just four years, the number of radio stations authorised to most markets doubled in number (Sterling and Haight 1978). Most of the new licences went to poorly capitalised independent stations. What did these stations use as programming? Most relied heavily on phonograph records. What kinds of records did they play? Ah, that gets us ahead of our story. What is the answer to the prior question, why did the networks withdraw their opposition to the granting of new broadcast licenses? To answer this question, it is useful to introduce the second major class of constraints, technology.

Technology

The development of the vinyl 45 rpm record, just discussed, was a major technological innovation important to the advent of rock music. Here we will note the importance of the advent of television and the development of the transistor radio receiver.

Television

Television, more than any other technological development, shaped the advent of rock music even though its influence was primarily indirect. Television began to be popular in the US in 1949. By 1955 65 per cent of all American households had a TV set (Sterling and Haight 1978) and the network programmes that had been the staple of network radio programming were transferred to television. Many experts, reasoning that no one would listen to a box when they could listen to a box that also showed moving pictures, thought that TV would completely replace radio. For this reason, the networks removed their objection to the licencing of many additional radio stations. For the same reason, radio network affiliates were put on the market in great numbers. A glut on the market, their price was further depressed by the fact that a spate of newly licenced AM radio stations were going on the air just at that time.⁷ TV programming did have some direct effect on the advent of rock music in the 1954–56 period. This will be discussed in the section on Market below.

The transistor

Until the mid-1950s, radio receivers used a set of large, power-consuming, heat-generating, vacuum tubes. Their use dictated that sets would be large, heavy and expensive pieces of furniture. While most American homes had a radio, few had more than two. Auto radios were the exception, and portable radios were not common. These so-called 'portables' were relatively large, fragile and, because of the large batteries required, quite heavy.

American radio manufacturers intended to introduce transistors, a Bell Laboratories invention, as a prestige item in their top-of-the-line TV and phonograph consoles and put them into cheaper TVs, phonographs and radios only gradually in succeeding years. The Japanese upset this strategy by shipping to the US hundreds of thousands of cheap, lightweight, compact transistor radios that operated on small flashlight batteries. Quickly young Americans learned to take these extremely inexpensive sets to school, to the beach, to parties, to work – everywhere they went (Eisenberg 1986).

Industry structure

To understand industry structure, one must consider both words: industry and structure. Defining the boundaries of the industry under consideration sounds simple but the process often raises issues of inclusion and exclusion that help reveal the structure. Our concern here is the popular music industry in the 1950s, but for present purposes the manufacture of musical instruments is not included. Live performance in bars, dance halls, concert halls and arenas while vital to building careers and promoting new records, is also peripheral to our concern. The empirical focus here is the popular music conveyed via the electronic media and via phonograph records. This brings into focus two sets of corporations that are conventionally identified as quite distinct industries, the manufacturers of phonograph records on the one hand and commercial radio stations on the other. The growing symbiotic relationship between phonograph record makers and commercial radio station owners was centrally important in the advent of rock music in the mid-1950s.

Industry *structure* can vary in several important ways: the degree of oligopoly, vertical integration and horizontal integration. Empirically, these three tend to go together but they can vary independently. Industry structure is oligopolistic when a few firms effectively control the style, amount and price of products produced. Perfect competition is when the actions of no firms significantly influence any of these factors. While an industry may vary from perfect competition to perfect oligopoly (that is monopoly), another structure is possible as well. This is an industry field in which there are a few firms that interact like an oligopoly, but in which there is also a large number of small firms that survive and prosper by serving small special segments of the total potential market not served by the oligopolists. Such a dual industry structure became well established in the music industry in the years between 1948 and 1958 (Gillett 1983). Second, industry structure involves vertical integration, the degree to which all production processes from securing raw materials to retail sales are performed by single firms. Third, industry structure has to do with the degree to which firms in an industry produce products only for that industry, or alternatively are conglomerates linked financially and functionally to other industries, that is, the degree of horizontal integration (Hirsch 1972; Peterson 1985).

Radio broadcasting, 1948

In the discussion that follows, and for much of the rest of the article, we will contrast the state of affairs in 1948, that is the time clearly before the advent of rock, with the state of affairs in 1958 after rock music had become well established. In 1948 the American radio industry consisted of four national networks and their affiliated stations in each of the radio markets around the country. In addition, there was a number of newly licensed independent commercial stations.

The networks competed with each other using what I call a 'slice strategy' which is characteristic in such conditions of oligopolistic competition. In such conditions, each network tried to increase the size of its slice of the total American radio audience. Programmes which drew large audiences to one of the networks stimulated the other networks to create similar programmes to capture back the lost 'market share'. In just a few seasons this strategy made for a daily and weekly cycle of programmes that was virtually the same from network to network. Thus, the weekly radio schedule of programmes on the air in 1948 looked not unlike the cycle of television broadcasting a decade or two later.

There was, however, more popular music played on radio in 1948 than on network television in 1958. On weekend evenings, each of the radio networks featured the major dance bands of the era broadcast *live* from one of the many large dance halls or elegant hotels around the country. The popular hits of the day were also played on the air by studio orchestras as part of the mix of the comedy and variety shows hosted by the likes of Bop Hope and Jack Benny. There was a programme called 'Your Hit Parade', that featured the top ten selling records of the week. But the *records* were not played! Rather, the studio band and its male or female singer, as appropriate, performed each of the songs in turn. Since the hit songs of 1948 were written, arranged and recorded by professionals to fit widely understood swing era conventions, it was easy for the studio band to faithfully reproduce the sound of the record. The early morning network 'wake-up' shows also had studio bands as did the homemaker shows that played around lunch time.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, there never was a national network programme in the 1940s that played phonograph records on the air. There were, however, several music programmes broadcast locally by network affiliates that *did* use phonograph records. Their form tells a great deal about the radio-programming aesthetic of the time. The most famous and most often copied was Martin Block's 'Make Believe Ballroom' that was first broadcast over New York's WNEW on 3 February 1935 (Sanjek 1988, p. 128). Through his introductions, sequencing of songs and even pseudo-interviews with band leaders, Block gave the programme the semblance of being broadcast live from a hotel ballroom.

The numerous independent radio stations that were being licensed at the time varied widely in their programming. We will focus here only on their music content. The better financed stations aired transcriptions which consisted of studio band concerts recorded on 16-inch metal-backed disks recorded and played back at 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm. Again, they simulated live music performance. Many country music bands played live on independent radio stations in all parts of the country (Peterson and Gowan 1973, pp. 1–27). No blues or r&b bands, however, received this kind of exposure via live performance on the air. There were in 1948, however, several innovative radio programmes that played records intended for black buyers. At several radio stations in the South and Mid-West, small independent record companies simply bought thirty-minute segments of airtime and used it to play and promote their own records. Innovative record stores also bought airtime to play and promote such records on sale in their stores.⁸

The record industry, 1948

In 1948 (and the year following) the record industry was as concentrated as it had ever been and more concentrated than it has been at any time since. Four firms – RCA, Columbia (CBS), Capitol and American Decca (MCA) – had released 81 per cent of all the records that reached the weekly top-ten hit list any time during the year. The top eight firms together released 95 per cent of all the hits and only three other firms had any hits at all! These figures, and the discussion that follows, are drawn from Peterson and Berger (1975) which presents a detailed analysis of how, in the late 1940s and early 1950s so few firms were able to control the market for recorded music so effectively, even though the basic product, a phonograph record, was cheap to record and manufacture.

Suffice it to say here that the leading firms maintained their predominance through combining both vertical integration in the record industry and horizontal integration with the film, radio, Broadway musical and film industries. The major record companies were able to maintain a dominant position by controlling three key points in the hit-making process. First, they garnered the services of creative people including songwriters and performers under long-term contracts investing a good deal of money promoting their name recognition. Second, they monopolised the channels of record distribution. As we have already noted, this was facilitated by the breakability of the 78 rpm shellac records of the time. Third, the major record companies maintained close ties with the people in network radio who decided what songs would be heard over the air. They were equally successful in controlling the songs that reached the public ear via Broadway musicals and movies.

Radio broadcasting, 1958

Radio did not die with the advent of TV as the pessimists had predicted. In the years between 1948 and 1958, however, the radio broadcasting industry was totally transformed. In 1948 the radio industry had been a national medium broadcasting a small number of expensively produced nationally distributed programmes over four networks that vied with each other for a larger slice of the total national radio audience. By 1958 there were a large number of locally programmed radio stations in each city across the US. Thus, in effect, what had been one single national market with four contending networks, became upwards of one hundred autonomous local markets each with eight to a dozen or more radio stations competing with each other (Sterling and Haight 1978, p. 45).

Financed by national advertisers, the old radio networks had been able to afford expensive forms of programming: dramatic programmes, comedy shows and live music. Depending primarily on local advertisers in each city, however, radio stations could not afford such expensive programming (Sterling and Haight 1978, p. 124). In the search for an inexpensive yet appealing form of entertainment, and this is crucial for our story, stations in increasing numbers between 1950 and 1956 turned to playing phonograph records on the air.

Thus, in the span of just six years, the relationship between the radio and record industries was transformed. The two industries had been, or at least were thought to be, in direct competition. Ever since the 1920s when the two technologies emerged, it was reasoned that if people heard records played on the air, they would not purchase them for themselves. As he reached the height of his popularity, for example, Bing Crosby required Decca to stamp on each of his records, 'Not licenced for radio air play'. For their part, radio executives had disdained playing 'canned music'. Now, the two were inexorably bound together. Radio depended on the music industry for programming material, and record-makers, finding that radio airplay increased rather than depressed the demand for a record, quickly came to depend on radio to, in effect, advertise and promote their new releases.

As the numerous local stations competed with each other for listeners, they began to differentiate themselves by playing different kinds of records. Thus, the aesthetic range of records played on the air increased dramatically by the mid-1950s. We will examine this process in greater detail below.

The record industry, 1958

The greatly increased play of records on the air profoundly changed the record industry in the 1950s. Statistics show the picture very clearly. Record sales which had been in decline in 1948 and 1949 increased gradually from 1950 through 1954. Then every year for the rest of the decade sales grew rapidly so that the total value of records sold in 1959 was well over double what it had been in 1954.⁹

The major record companies, committed to the swing and crooner aesthetic, were slow to adapt to the changes that were taking place in radio and a large number of recently founded small record companies like Sun Records, Atlantic Records, Stax, King, Chess, Vee Jay, Dot, Coral, and Imperial provided the sorts of music that proved more popular. Thus they were able to successfully compete in the national popular music market (Gillett 1983). Again, the statistical figures show this in stark detail.

The four firms that had 81 per cent of the popular music hits in 1948 gradually lost market share until it reached 74 per cent in 1955. Then things changed rapidly. Their market share was down to 66 per cent in 1956 and sank rapidly over the next few years reaching just 34 per cent by 1959! In 1948 just fifty-seven songs were hits, these were produced by eleven firms, and five of these firms had just one hit. In 1949, there were ninety-two hits that were produced by forty-two record companies, and of these, twenty-nine of these firms had just one hit. In a word, an industry that had been dominated by an oligopoly of four firms rapidly became an industry in which a large number of small firms were able to compete on even terms with the majors. The crucial reason was that, to attract larger numbers of listeners, radio stations sought out attention-catching records irrespective of their source.

The two other factors that had helped ensure the hegemony of the major companies changed as well. The majors no longer had a corner on the creative talent. On the contrary, it was the small companies that developed the rock performers and writers while the majors resisted the changing aesthetic or, as in the case of Elvis Presley, bought the contracts of rock performers only after they had proven successful on one of the new small record labels (Gillett 1983). In addition, the majors no longer controlled the national distribution of records. While only a few of the new companies had their own systems of distribution, several national independent distribution companies were formed who were willing to distribute records for anyone willing to pay the fee.

Organisation structure

Organisation structure has three dimensions. The first is the number of decision levels in the organisation. The more levels there are, the greater is the bureaucracy, and the lower the ability to adapt to changes coming from the environment. Large organisations tend to have more levels but not necessarily (Peterson and Berger 1971). The second dimension of organisation structure is functional differentiation, the degree to which tasks are performed by specialised departments. A record company, for example, might have separate departments for songwriters, performers, producers, studio technicians and promotion. RCA and Columbia were organised this way in 1948. Alternatively, a firm might have several independent divisions each with its own groups of such specialists working together on related musical projects that are released under a distinctive divisional label. Warner Brothers Records in the 1970s and 1980s exemplified this pattern. The third dimension of organisation structure mirrors vertical integration for industry structure. At the firm level, the question is to what degree all stages in the production, promotion and distribution process are performed 'in-house' by divisions of the company or, alternatively, are performed by a series of firms that specialise in just one aspect or stage of the process. Such specialty firms are called 'job-shops' because they contract with a number of different clients on a job-to-job basis. In the 1950s another form of organisation emerged which I call 'solo production'. Here all the creative stages are performed in-house but they are performed by or under the direct supervision of a single individual. A number of the most innovative producers of the early rock era worked in this way, but perhaps the best contemporary exemplar of solo production is Prince and his Paisley Park production company. In 1948 all of the major record companies had their own recording studios and contractually required their artists to record in-house. By 1980

the majors had sold almost all of their own studios allowing their artists to record in independent job-shop studios or as solo producers.

Radio stations

In 1948 there were two quite different sorts of network-affiliated stations. There were the three or four stations of each network where the dramatic, comedy, variety, and soap opera programmes were created. Virtually all the network programming was created at these production stations located in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Nashville. Each major programme had its own staff of actors, singers, script writers, joke-writers, and other creative personnel. A staff band would play on several different programmes. Technicians were organised by function and jealously protected their job rights from each other. For example, by labour union contract it was illegal for anyone but a union engineer to touch the studio control board or phonograph record turntables. Finance, sales and promotion, as well as transmission engineering, were separate departments. The total staff at each of these production stations numbered well over a hundred and in New York approached a thousand.

The rest of the network-affiliated stations in 1948 were organised quite differently. They acted primarily as the local transmitters of network-fed programming. There was some local news, agricultural reports and sports broadcasting, but to keep their network status, stations had to air virtually all the programming that was supplied. The staff consisted of several engineers, several announcers and a small advertising staff that worked to get local advertisers for the locally generated programmes and for the local advertising spots built into some of the network programming. Dependent as they were on network programming, there was little scope for creativity by the local affiliate stations.

In 1958 radio station structure was totally different. The network production stations simply did not exist. Most of their creative and technical personnel had not been fired; rather, they were transferred to the network's television affiliate and continued to do their work, much as before. By 1948, radio stations had few levels of authority and many fewer specialised departments and jobs. Typically, the staff consisted of several engineers who kept the equipment running, a small marketing staff that worked to get local merchants to buy advertisements, and a group of djs. The djs (except at the biggest and most traditional stations) cued and played records themselves while keeping up a banter that included comments about community and school events, forthcoming rock concerts, advertisements and brief segments of news and weather. Network affiliates and independent stations were much alike except that at the former the national news was fed from New York as were several programmes including major sports events, and the New York Metropolitan Opera Programmes on Saturday afternoons (Routt *et al.* 1978).

Phonograph record firms

The oligopolistic record companies of 1948 were bureaucratically organised with both a large number of levels in the hierarchy of authority and numerous functionally differentiated and vertically integrated departments. This is a form of organisation well suited to efficiently producing a large number of standard products. Given their collective control of entry into the popular music market, the

major record firms were able to operate profitably by crafting the kind of music that could be produced by such a bureaucratic machine.

By 1958 a large of small companies operating on a mix of job-shop and solo-production had successfully entered the market. They survived by using every means, legal and illegal, to get their records played on the air and then get copies of the records distributed to record stores quickly and in sufficient numbers. Most of the independents that survived more than two or three years and moved up in the ranks of record firms did so by crafting a sound that could be identified with the company. Motown, Stax and A&M are good examples of companies that grew in market share rivalling for a time the major companies by creating a distinctive sound.

The established major companies lost three-quarters of the market share, as noted above, but did not disappear. Rather they adapted to the new conditions. By the 1970s the majors had regained much of their prior market share, by, in effect, becoming financing and distribution companies for a series of divisions that were allowed to operate as independent small firms (Peterson and Berger 1971; Denisoff 1973). By 1958, however, this major structural reorganisation had not yet begun. Instead, the majors were attacking rock and its creators in the press, and in the courts, believing that it was an artificially induced fad that would soon fade away if they could just gain control, once more, of the music played on the radio (Chapple and Garofalo 1977).

Occupational careers

The occupational career-history of each individual is unique. Nonetheless, general patterns can be discerned. For our present purposes, it is adequate to briefly describe four general career patterns: craftsman, showman, entrepreneur and bureaucratic functionary. The relative balance of these four patterns changed dramatically in the mid-1950s profoundly influencing the early development of rock. Before getting to this story, however, each of the four career patterns needs to be defined briefly.

The craftsman takes great pride in having the (sometimes secret) knowledge, and having just the right tools, to solve technical problems. The craftsman says to the contractor of his/her services: 'you tell me what you want accomplished, but don't tell me how to do it. I will do the job for you competently, efficiently, and without drawing attention to myself'. The craftsman is much more concerned about building a reputation for doing jobs in the way that will bring recognition among fellow-craftsmen than with the aesthetic or financial success of the final product on which he/she has worked (Peterson and White 1979, pp. 411–39). But craftsmen are not all just hacks. As Bennett (1980) has noted, many practice long and hard to perfect new ways of performing their craft tasks and, in the process, make incremental changes in the aesthetic.

Showmen contrast dramatically with craftsmen. Ignoring the disdain of other professional performers, the showman is a salesman of the self who will do anything that is necessary to please a paying audience. This sort of 'showiness' may involve manipulating sexuality, appealing to the baser sentiments, mocking aesthetic performance standards, wearing outlandish clothes, etc. The successful showman is always aware of the effect on the audience of every move, every word, every gesture and continuously changes the act to fit the particular audience and build to the best possible final roar of approval. Many of those showmen who do not learn how to

separate their stage *persona* from their off-stage life live spectacular and tumultuous, short lives.

Entrepreneurs in the culture industry are persons who, sensing an un-met audience demand, bring together creative, financing, marketing and distributing factors in unique ways. Henry Ford, who developed the first mass-produced automobile in the 1920s, is a good example of an entrepreneur because he did not invent any of the numerous engineering, manufacturing, financing, or marketing techniques that went into producing his famous Model T. He exemplified entrepreneurship in his ability to combine all these elements in a unique way that satisfied a market demand that others at the time were not able to see. While it has been conventional to think of entrepreneurs as self-employed business people, entrepreneurs may also be found in organisations (Peterson 1981). The success of entrepreneurs is measured by how financially successful they are.

Functionaries fill the ranks of bureaucratically structured organisations. They are, in important ways, the opposite of entrepreneurs because they are the source of continuity in the culture industry while entrepreneurs are a prime source of innovation. Although they are virtually ignored in most studies of the culture industry, functionaries make many of the decisions that shape the cultural products that are produced. A functionary is paid a specified salary and is rewarded with promotion for following the rules of the employing organisation and faithfully performing the tasks set by his/her supervisor. This system of rewards, as Max Weber long ago observed, leads functionaries to play it safe and avoid taking risks.

Craftsman, showman, entrepreneur and functionary have been described in pure form, but, in practice, the occupational careers of most people in the music industry combine several of these patterns.¹⁰ They may be more of one in some situation and more of another in other situations. In addition, they may move from more of one to more of another in the course of their careers.

In moving from a focus on the structure of the music industry to the structure of organisations, and now to the organisation of occupational careers in the music industry, we are moving from the macro level to an ever more micro focus within a sector of the commercial culture industry. Consequently, since we have already described the salient changes in industry and organisation structure, the reader will be able to predict many of the differences between 1948 and 1958 occupational career patterns, and this section can be relatively brief.

Careers in radio

In 1948 the jobs in radio were a mix of craft and bureaucratic functionary. In combination these two operated to create radio programming that was standardised and of high quality within a narrow aesthetic range. Careers in radio were quite different in 1958. Most craft standards had been repudiated, and with smaller organisations having fewer organisational levels, there were many fewer positions for pure functionaries. In their place there were many more opportunities for entrepreneurship and showmanship.

Most conspicuous in this change was the transformation of the functionary position of radio announcer into the showman-entrepreneur dj. The radio announcer of 1948 took great pride in being able to read news, advertisements and announcements flawlessly in an even, accent-free 'radio voice'. Typically beginning work at a small market station, the successful announcer's career involved working

hard to get a job announcing at a major station and then on the network itself. In sharp contrast, the dj of 1958 strove to develop a distinctive voice and *persona*. In the industry this was called 'personality radio'.

The personality radio dj talked about local news and events of interest to teenagers in an excited yet conversational tone. He (never 'she' in the 1950s) took telephoned requests to play particular records and announced song dedications from one listener to another. Playing love-songs, he was sympathetic to the travails of young love and talked knowingly of how it felt to find one's true love and to experience heart-break. Scott Shannon, for example, had a regular segment he called 'Crying Time'. In introducing records, the personality dj talked excitedly about the performer's personal life and noted forthcoming concerts in the area. 'Wolfman Jack' with his distinctive growling voice and series of recorded wolf calls was one of the best early exponents of personality radio. The reputation of the best-paid personality djs came, in part, from their ability to 'discover' hit records of new artists and play them on the air before their rivals. Their reputations were diminished, of course, whenever their 'discoveries' did not find favour with the public. The personality dj was promoted and invited to take a better paying job in a larger radio market if he regularly garnered a larger share of listeners than djs on rival stations.

To enhance his popularity, the personality dj would become involved in the local community. He ran contests and made numerous personal appearances at high school and local community functions. He also acted as the master of ceremonies at rock concerts. These concerts were mentioned often on the air, and the records of the artists scheduled to appear were also played frequently in the weeks before the concert. In some instances djs had more than an aesthetic interest in the artists whose records they played. To get airplay, performers sometimes were asked to make the dj their manager, or give him co-writing credit on their potential hit songs. Alan Freed, one of the most entrepreneurial and flamboyant dj-promoters of rock from 1952 through 1958, was eventually convicted of illegally using his position as a dj on a leading New York station to promote the careers of artists with whom he was financially connected. For example, although he had had no part in writing the song, for a time he received royalties for co-writing 'Maybellene' with Chuck Berry (Chapple and Garofalo 1977). Though such practices have been condemned, they did mean that hundreds of artists recording on dozens of small record labels who in 1948 would have had no chance of radio airplay were able to get their creative efforts before a large national audience in the mid-1950s through the efforts of a few entrepreneurial djs.

Careers in the record business

In 1948, the record business had a mix of craftsmen and functionaries. We will focus on an example of each and trace their changes to showman and entrepreneurial forms by the mid-1950s, showing how these changes were vital to the advent of rock music.

In 1948 songwriter was one specialised job in the 'tune factory' that regularly turned out new records at the major record companies. Most successful writers worked for one of the major publishing houses centred in New York and some were employed by the publishing divisions of the major record firms. They had a craftsman's orientation to their work. Rather than writing from personal experience or from inspiration, they wrote well-crafted songs much like those that were hits at

the time or were tailored to satisfy the demands of the person commissioning the song. As one of the most famous writers of the time is reported to have said when asked when he generally got the inspiration for a song, 'When I get the check for writing the song'. Such writers have what has been called a 'product image', that is an idea of just the sort of song that will be accepted by the next persons in the long decision-chain that eventually links song writer with music fan via the apparatus of the culture industry (Ryan and Peterson 1982).

The showmen songwriters like Bob Dylan who crafted songs primarily out of their own experience did not become important in popular music until the 1960s, but in the mid-1950s a number of singer-songwriters like Chuck Berry did come to the fore. They had what Gans (1957) calls an 'audience image' and created songs that they could sing convincingly for their audience. While most songs created in this way did not win acceptance, the ones that did became wildly successful because they spoke directly to fans in ways that the conventional 'tune factory' song could not duplicate.

In 1948 one of the kinds of functionaries in each of the major record companies was designed the 'A&R' man. These letters stand for 'Artist and Repertoire'. It was the job of this functionary to select the appropriate singer or band to perform the promising new songs being written by the company's songwriters. By the mid-1950s, the designation A&R man was being replaced by 'producer'. As usually happens when an occupation changes its name, this change of name to producer signalled a profound change in the nature of the job.

Typically, the function of the new-style producer was to seek out singers and groups that showed promise, to sift among their songs or to find appropriate songs for their emerging image, to facilitate the recording process by selecting the appropriate set of studio musicians to complement the headliner's sound, and to see that the record, once marketed, got the appropriate promotion. Such producer-entrepreneurs first appeared in the new independent record companies, but by the end of the 1950s they had displaced the older A&R man in the popular music divisions of the major record companies as well. For a detailed analysis of these changes and the impact on the music produced, see Peterson and Berger (1971). For a comparison with the role of the producer in France, see Hennion (1981, 1983).

The shift from craftsmen and functionaries to a greater reliance on showmen and entrepreneurs mirrors the changes taking place in the structure of firms and the nature of the record industry as a whole. The structure of the industry, of firms and of careers that had for several decades managed the slow evolution of fads and styles, suddenly gave way to a system of production geared to the revolutionary transformation of the music industry described above.

Market

Since, in a market economy like that of the US, the audience finances popular culture through its selections among what is on offer, the audience is every bit as important in shaping popular culture as is law, technology and the other 'constraints' already discussed. In focusing on consumers, however, I will not use the designation, 'audience'. Rather, the term 'market' will be used for a very important reason. What is most important in shaping the decisions of those in the culture industry is not the preferences of the population of actual or potential consumers, but rather their preferences *as these are understood* by decision-makers in the culture industry.

Accordingly, we use the word 'market' to designate the audience as it is conceptualised by the culture industry. As we will see, there was a dramatic transformation in the conception of the market with the advent of rock.

The homogeneous market of 1948

As noted above, in 1948 four radio networks competed with each other. In effect, they saw the radio audience as one vast homogenous market. Collectively they worked together to maintain the laws and government regulations that kept others from entering the competition for the market. They did this by lobbying against the licensing of more radio stations. At the same time, they competed fiercely with each other to increase their own 'slice' of the homogeneous market 'pie'. While they said that they sought programming that was attractive to more people, in practice what they did was to try to improve on previously successful formulae and to create new programmes that would offend as few as possible. This radio oligopolist's strategy conforms to the proposition proposed by Peterson and Berger (1975) that the fewer the number of competitors in a market, the more homogeneous will be their products and the lower will be the rate of innovation.

The situation was quite similar in the record business. As noted before, in 1948 the four largest firms accounted for 81 per cent of all the hit records. As in the case of the radio industry programming, the big four record companies competed with each other to increase their own slice of what was seen as an homogeneous national market for popular records. Again the oligopolists' marketing strategy put an accent on 'sameness'.

The practice of producing 'cover records' provides an excellent case in point. When one of the companies had a significant hit on a song, the other oligopolists would immediately 'cover' it by putting out a recording of the same song by one of their own singers or orchestras. The practice of covering hits also helped to keep independent companies from successfully competing in the market. When in 1947 Bullet records of Nashville released 'Near You' by the Francis Craig Orchestra it gained considerable record sales in the region because the Craig Orchestra was a regular performer on WSM, a powerful radio station broadcasting live from Nashville. Within weeks of the success of the Bullet recording, each of the four major record companies released their own version, and all of these reached hit status in the weeks that followed, completely eclipsing the original version by the independent record company (Whitburn 1973).

The heterogeneous market of 1958

As noted above, when radio network programmes were transferred to television in the late 1940s, an increasing amount of radio airtime was filled with recorded music. Initially radio programmers played a wide range of records in the belief that the audience would become bored and turn to another station if they did not present a wide range of sounds. Then in 1954, the music director at an independent radio station in Omaha, Nebraska made a significant observation. Eating lunch at a diner with one of his djs, he and his colleague became extremely annoyed with their waitress who kept putting money into the jukebox to play the same two songs over and over again. But then he reasoned that she was voluntarily spending her own money for this extremely narrow range of music so this must be what she, and

perhaps thousands like her, wanted to hear. Since his station was not doing well in the ratings, he decided to experiment. He began a policy of playing, throughout the entire day, nothing but what the trade magazine charts showed were hit records, changing this mix of records weekly when the new hit charts were released. Instantaneously his station became the most listened-to station in Omaha, and within months this new formatting principle, which had come to be called 'Top Forty' because only something like the top forty charted records would be played, had been copied by major radio stations all over North America (Wright 1986).

One might assume that introduction of the Top Forty format reduced the aesthetic range of music heard on the air. In most cases, however, it did not have this effect in 1954. This is because virtually all of the songs that had been heard on the air fit the big-band crooner aesthetic while, because the charts were based not only on radio airplay but also on jukebox play and record sales, many r&b records as well as some country music records charted. Thus, for the first time, these sorts of records began to receive wide exposure via the radio (Gillett 1983; Shaw 1987).

Once the idea of turning a radio station into something like a jukebox with forty selections had been established, there was rapid experimentation with the idea. By 1958 industry executives had developed the view of the radio market as a set of distinct segments (teen-oriented Top Forty, soul music, country music, classical music, jazz, religious music, middle-of-the-road, etc.), each with jukebox-like radio stations catering to its distinct music preferences (Peterson and Davis 1974; Wright 1986). Thus the view of a single homogeneous pie with four oligopolistic networks contending for a larger slice was passé. Now the market was conceived of as a mosaic of distinct segments, each with its own aesthetic. Rather than seeking the sound that would offend no one, now the innovative programmers sought out music that might offend, shock or bore many people but would capture the devoted attention of the targetted segment of the audience.

These changes in the way the radio market was defined had immediate consequences for the record industry. Beginning in late 1954, and increasing rapidly for the next several years, there was a demand for an ever-widening aesthetic range of records. The major companies were slow to react, and as we already noted a large number of small companies filled the new demand.

The times were not changing, but the constraints were: a summary

At the outset, we asked why rock broke into the mass market in 1955, a year that seemed unpropitious for a major aesthetic revolution. If I have done my job well enough, the reader can now give the answer. I will, therefore, forgo a complete review and just offer a brief summary.

In the early 1950s, the music industry was blind to the large and growing unsatiated demand for greater variety in music and deaf to the efforts of musicians that might have satisfied that demand. The music industry was financially as well as aesthetically committed to the big-band-crooner style of popular music of the time and, because of its oligopolistic control of the production, distribution and marketing of new music, was able to thwart the marketing of alternative styles.

Then with the transfer of network radio programming to television, radio turned to playing records as the cheapest effective form of programming. The arrival of cheap transistor radios and the development of the Top Forty radio-as-jukebox format meant that a much larger number and far wider range of music was exposed

to the audience. Using the new durable 45 rpm records, and taking advantage of the developing network of independent record distributors, numerous independent record companies experimented with a wide range of new sounds in an effort to tap the unsatiated market demand. In a matter of two dozen months between late 1954 and early 1957 rock was forged in this cauldron of entrepreneurial creativity.

This article has focused on a unique event, the advent of rock at a particular historical moment. Nonetheless, as I have shown elsewhere (Peterson 1967; 1972), the advent of jazz following the First World War was sudden, and like the great change in country music in the 1970s (Peterson 1978; Peterson and DiMaggio 1975) involved many of the same processes found to be important here. This suggests that an analysis of the role of the six 'constraints' on the production of culture together with the influence of creators and audiences might be useful in understanding the dynamics of other facets of music and the culture industry more generally.

Endnotes

- 1 The word 'rock' or 'rock music' will be used to refer to all forms of the music including its 1950s pre-Beatles forms that are often designated 'rock'n'roll' and 'rockabilly'.
- 2 There is disagreement among the historians of rock over dating its nascence, but all agree that it emerged as a major force on the commercial popular culture scene in 1954. See Gillett 1983; Denisoff 1973; Chapple and Garofalo 1977; Marcus 1976; Hendler 1983; Curtis 1987; Shaw 1987.
- 3 How much, for example did the racial mixing in the music of the late 1950s affect racial attitudes and thus influence race relations and the civil rights movement? On this question see Street (1986). Rock, quite rightly, has been condemned for its male sexual chauvinism (Meade 1972; Chapple and Garofalo 1977), yet it first voiced on mass level the full range of questions of teen sexuality. Frith (1981) reviews the various points of view on the topic. Again, how much did the counter-cultural thrust of the rock culture of the late 1960s feed Federal Government concern with internal subversion through the music and thus influence government policy in ways that helped to galvanise public feelings that the Vietnam war had to be stopped? On this question see Wiener (1984) and Street (1986). On a related issue, the suppression of the huge multi-day rock festivals, see Peterson and Gowan (1973). Beyond these issue-oriented questions, there is the broader question of the creation of a teen generation for itself. Just how central a role did rock music have in creating a self-conscious teen identity in opposition to parents, school and other adult symbols of authority? On this question see Frith (1981; 1984); Hibbard and Kaleialoha (1983).
- 4 For a systematic review and refutation of the 'supply side' explanation for innovation, see Peterson (1981); for a detailed study of the social structural condition that foster innovation in the music industry, see Peterson and Berger (1971).
- 5 For two quite different views of the music 'that might have been', see Marcus (1976); and Guralnick (1979).
- 6 For an exquisite case study of how the advent of BMI fostered country music songwriting, see Rumble (1980).
- 7 Large numbers of FM-band radios stations were also being licenced in this period further adding to the confusion over the future of radio broadcasting. FM did not influence the development of rock music, however, until the latter part of the 1960s when FM gave impetus to the development of 'underground rock' (Denisoff 1973; Chapple and Garofalo 1977).
- 8 Personal interviews with Randy Wood, John R. and R. Murphy Nash.
- 9 These figures, and all the others cited in this section, unless otherwise noted, are drawn from Peterson and Berger (1975).
- 10 The reader may have noted that one important occupational type seems to be missing, the creative artist, the genius. Some performers involved with the advent of rock including Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Elvis Presley have recently been called geniuses. At the time, however, they were not so designated, nor did they act the part.

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