I remember when I got my first "rock 'n' roll" single. It was August 1957, the baby boom was at its peak, and the King was still the King. Like millions of other fans, I extended the King's reign by buying what was then Elvis Presley's number one single, "Teddy Bear." Maybe I decided to make that eventful purchase after watching a new network television program, *American Bandstand*, which ABC began showing every weekday afternoon. Since I was only eight years old, I might have thought about stuffed animals as I listened to Presley sing, "Baby, let me be/Around you every night/Run your fingers through my hair/And cuddle me real tight." The teenagers who danced on Bandstand, though, knew that "Teddy Bear" was about something else. So did the couples who listened to other Presley hits like "I Need Your Love Tonight" and "A Big Hunk O' Love" on the car radio while sitting in the back seat when out on dates. Eventually, I too learned why Elvis's suggestive lyrics and pulsating performances titillated teenagers and alarmed adults. By then, as Danny and the Juniors proclaimed in their pop anthem, "rock 'n' roll [was] here to stay," and, as teen idol Ricky Nelson crooned, I was "old enough to love."

Presley, Bill Haley, Fats Domino, Little Richard, and other members of rock's founding generation made this new music an essential part of youth culture. Millions of young people collected 45-rpm singles, listened to their favorite top forty disc jockeys on transistor radios, and went to record hops and concerts on dates. Rock music and the youth culture it helped define did more, though, than expand the teen market in a booming consumer economy. Popular songs and performers provided advice and examples about questions that were central to young people—how to dress or be popular, what to do on a date, where to place limits on sexuality. Rock 'n' roll music, at times, reinforced courtship conventions. Elvis extolled eternal love in "Love Me Tender." The Cookies, who recorded a single in 1963 entitled "Girls Grow Up Faster Than Boys," embraced restrictive gender roles when they exclaimed, "I'm everything a girl should be, now/36-21-35." Yet rock 'n' roll could also be subversive, as it challenged cultural norms or prevailing practices. Elvis beckoned to his girlfriend, "Baby, Let's Play House" and performed this song so that there was no ambiguity in that title. These songs and performing styles electrified some listeners and...
panicked others, yet they helped shape young couples' hopes or expectations about "how far to go" and how to get there.

**National Standards**

This lesson plan will help students master the following standards for Era 9, Postwar United States (1945-1970s):

Standard 1B: Demonstrate understanding of how social changes of the postwar period affected various Americans by examining the influence of popular culture and analyzing the role of the mass media in homogenizing American culture and assessing its validity for the "other America."

Standard 2G of the Standards in Historical Thinking: Draw upon visual, literary, and musical sources.

**Time**

These exercises should take one to two class periods.

**Student Objectives**

Popular music can provide a window for viewing the youth culture of the 1950s and 1960s. The music both reflected popular attitudes about dating and male-female relationships and helped to mold that thinking. Songs whose lyrics were too explicit about sexual matters would not get air time on most radio stations or on youth-oriented shows such as *American Bandstand*. Even as late as 1967, Ed Sullivan, the host of a weekly television variety show, asked the Rolling Stones to change the title lyric of their hit song from "Let's Spend the Night Together" to "Let's Spend Some Time Together." Programmers and censors set limits—however flexible or dynamic—on what audiences could hear or see in mainstream mass media.

The main objectives of this lesson are:
1. To interpret rock 'n' roll music and performances as expressions of youth culture of the 1950s and 1960s.
2. To make connections between popular music and courtship conventions and practices.
3. To understand why rock 'n' roll music and performances could create anxieties about challenges to conventions concerning dating and sexuality.
4. To examine different ideas about gender roles and their relationship to dating and sexuality.

"All Shook Up"

Elvis Presley appealed and unsettled. His performances created frenzy among fans and distress among critics. Even Ed Sullivan, who signed Presley for three appearances on his Sunday night variety program, worried about whether Elvis was really "family entertainment." On September 9, 1956, Presley's first appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* produced record ratings. Yet Sullivan still fretted over the kind of entertainment he was bringing into millions of American homes. Eventually Sullivan found a way to reconcile his desire for high ratings with his sense of propriety. When Presley made his final appearance on January 6, 1957, the cameras were positioned so that "Elvis the Pelvis" could be heard but not seen.

Excerpts from Presley's appearances on the *Ed Sullivan Show* are available on *Elvis: The Great Performances*, volume 3. Play "Ready Teddy" (September 1956) and "Don't Be Cruel" (January 1957) for the class, and then ask students the following questions:

1. What was most striking or distinctive about Presley's music and performances? How were his look and style different from his back-up singers?
2. At the end of Presley's January 1957 performance, Sullivan said, "I can't figure this darn thing out. You know, he just does this [Sullivan shakes a little], and everybody yells." Can anybody explain what Sullivan could not—why there was so much screaming?
3. How were Presley's two performances different? Why do you think that the cameras only showed Elvis in the second performance from the waist up?
4. Can you imagine why some parents would worry if their sons or daughters were out on dates listening or dancing to Presley's music?

"Will You Love Me Tomorrow?"

Male performers like Presley, Chuck Berry, and Buddy Holly were rock's first big stars, but by the beginning of the 1960s female performers gained new prominence. The first of the "girl groups" to have a number one single was the Shirelles, four young women who began singing together while they attended junior high school in Passaic, New Jersey. After moderate success with several singles, their recording of "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" went to the top of the charts in January 1961. The song had an unusual frankness for its time, as it explored uncertain boundaries between passion and...
The Supremes. (Image donated by Corbis-Bettman.)

love. Every young woman who dated surely knew what it was like to wonder, “But will my heart be broken/When the night meets the morning sun.”

Other female performers recorded popular songs that addressed the conflicts and concerns of women who dated. Occasionally these female performers seemed to convey incipient feminist messages by singing about women making choices in courtship and opposing male dominance. Yet their songs also provided advice to accept double standards in dating and sexuality and to please men. There were even a few instances when female performers urged their boyfriends to show their affection by controlling or abusing them. Joanie Sommers, for example, had a top-ten single in 1962 with “Johnny Get Angry” in which she told her boyfriend to “get angry...get mad/Give me the biggest lecture I ever had/I want a brave man/I want a cave man/Johnny show me that you care, really care for me.” The Crystals recorded a song with the abhorrent title, “He Hit Me (It Felt Like a Kiss),” about a woman who had been “untrue” and found that her boyfriend’s violence reassured her of his love. Even the same performer could provide radically different messages. In “You Don’t Own Me,” Lesley Gore sang about a woman who told her boyfriend, “Don’t tell me what to do/Don’t tell me what to say/And, please, when I go out with you/Don’t put me on display.” Yet in a later single, “Maybe I Know,” Gore conceded that she had a “cheating” boyfriend but asked plaintively, “What can I do?” Mixed messages were not just in the lyrics but also in the images of female performers. Some, such as the Shirelles and Lesley Gore, and the Supremes—the most popular of all the “girl groups”—conformed to prevailing norms of female dress and be-

havior. Others, most notably the Shangri-Las and the Ronettes, helped redefine those conventions. It is important for students to see as well as hear the female performers of the early 1960s.

Play “Will You Love Me Tomorrow,” which is available on The Best of the Girl Groups, volume 1 (Rhino Records) and then ask students the following questions:
1. What was the central choice for the woman in this song? What conflicts did she experience, and why was her choice difficult?
2. According to this song, how much power or influence did a woman who was dating in the 1960s have in defining a romantic relationship?

Next play videos of two songs of Lesley Gore, “You Don’t Own Me” and “Maybe I Know,” both of which are available on Born to Rock (Fox Video). Then ask students these questions:
1. How were the messages about dating in these two songs different?
2. Why do you think that young women in the early 1960s could get such conflicting advice about dating or relationships even from the same singer?

Finally, show videos of the Ronettes performing “Be My Baby” and the Shangri-Las singing “Give Him a Great Big Kiss,” both available on Girl Groups, and ask the students:
1. How would you describe the performing styles of these two groups? How were they different from Lesley Gore?
2. Do you think that the songs and performing styles of the Ronettes and the Shangri-Las suggest that women were redefining gender roles? What effects might such changes have had on dating conventions?
"I Want to Hold Your Hand"

When the Beatles first came to the United States in February 1964, the reaction was sensational. Fans mobbed Kennedy airport in New York; female admirers lined the street below their hotel windows; and a record audience tuned in for their first appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. The reaction exceeded the frenzy over Elvis in 1956. The teenage population, swelled by the Baby Boom, helped make the Beatles a cultural phenomenon. For fourteen consecutive weeks, Beatles’ songs were at the top of the pop charts. During one week in April 1964, the group had the five most popular singles in the United States, something never achieved before or since. Young people everywhere listened to their music and sang their songs. Young men got Beatle haircuts and bought Beatle clothing. Young women wanted to date someone who at least looked or acted like a Beatle, if they could not spend an evening with John, Paul, George, or Ringo.

Show students the Beatles’ performance of “I Want to Hold Your Hand” from their first appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show on February 9, 1964. It is available on The Beatles: The First U.S. Visit (MPI Home Video). Ask students the following questions:

1. How did the Beatles help to redefine male gender roles? How were they different in appearance, dress, style, and performance than Elvis Presley?
2. What kind of male-female relationship did the Beatles sing about in “I Want to Hold Your Hand”?
3. Why do you think so many women found the Beatles so appealing? ☐

Select Bibliography

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