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GEOGRAPHIC FACTORS IN THE ORIGIN, EVOLUTION, AND DIFFUSION OF ROCK AND ROLL MUSIC

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ABSTRACT. This paper attempts to illustrate certain important concepts in the field of cultural geography through the study of a very popular phenomenon—Rock and Roll music. The roles that the White and Black rural South and various American cities played as culture hearths and centers of culture contact are discussed along with the effects of mass migrations and mass media on American musical tastes and styles. Rock and Roll is looked at from a diffusionist point of view in that throughout its evolution, various places played important parts as “way stations” as certain American musical styles gradually spread from rural southern shacks to New York recording studios.

Introduction

Many interesting generalizations have been put forth in the field of cultural geography dealing with such things as culture hearths, diffusion patterns, culture contact, migrations of peoples and ideas, etc., but most of the examples used to illustrate these generalizations or concepts have been rather peripheral to the interests of most American students. Most available readings in the field of cultural geography deal with such things as ancient pottery, European housetypes, agricultural crops and practices, and dry, quantitative treatments of such things as the diffusion of radios in Sweden.¹ Cultural geography thus has an image among many students that is perhaps somewhat less than inspiring. Very little has been done with popular, observable aspects of our culture even though many of these aspects lend themselves quite readily to a diffusionist point of view and can be used successfully to illustrate most of

the important concepts in cultural geography. One such topic is popular music including the various musical styles and instruments which influence the musical culture of an area.

There are several ways in which popular music can be geographically relevant. For example, since imagery is becoming an important part of geography and geographers are increasingly concerned with such things as cognitive maps, the images of places as put forth in song may be studied. For example, the image of San Francisco has been modified in the minds of many radio listeners over the past decade as its song image changed from “I Left My Heart in San Francisco” to the more hip “Warm San Franciscan Nights.” Music has certainly played a very big part in the images many people have of such places as New Orleans and Liverpool and it would be interesting to know what impact the “California-Surf” sound of the early 1960s had on the migration of young people to that state. In this paper, however, I am going to deal mostly with the concept of cultural diffusion as illustrated by the origin, evolution, and diffusion of a particular kind of American

¹ See, for example, Phillip Wagner and Marvin Mikesell (eds.), *Readings in Cultural Geography* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

music, Rock and Roll—later to become simply “Rock.” I will look at the roles that various geographic centers have played in the development of what is probably the nation’s, if not the world’s, most popular music as well as some of the spatial relationships that were important in its rise to international popularity. In addition, I will also discuss the topic of cultural resistance to Rock and Roll, both within the United States and, briefly, on the international level.

Basically, Rock and Roll music emerged from a combining of Black Rhythm and Blues and White Country and Western into a type of music that was acceptable to the adherents of both styles. Its formation also represented a geographically-based revolt by “the provinces” against an old cultural capital (New York City) which was not fulfilling the needs of a great many people in the country. Due to the importance of these two cultural streams (Black Blues and White Country) in the formation of early Rock and Roll, I will briefly outline some geographic and social factors associated with them. I will relate this discussion, if only indirectly, to such important geographic concepts as the culture hearth, processes of diffusion, and patterns of acceptance and rejection.

The culture hearth concept in geography concerns aspects of the culture of a particular place as they relate to the origin of certain new culture traits in that place. In other words, why did a particular cultural trait or group of cultural traits originate where it did? What special characteristics did the hearth area have that led to the origin of new behavioral or material cultural baggage? In this paper, such areas as the Appalachian Mountains, the Mississippi Delta, and various cities will serve to illustrate the idea of a culture hearth.

Diffusion processes involve the ways in which the new culture traits are spread. Since a new musical style is basically a new idea, it is relevant to look to such articles as Fritz Redlich’s “Ideas, Their Migration in Space and Over Time” in order to identify some of the different processes by which new musical traits may diffuse.² Redlich talks of three processes

² Fritz Redlich, “Ideas, Their Migration in Space and Transmittal Over Time,” *Kyklos*, 6, March, 1954.

by which ideas spread: (1) Personal contact—senders and receivers are neighbors or are able to congregate some place for face-to-face communication, a nightclub in the case of music, for example; (2) Actual human migration occurs—people move to new environments taking their ideas with them; (3) Objectification—putting the ideas down in the form of books, records, music sheets, etc. which can be diffused by retailers or by mass media. All of these processes are well illustrated by the study of American Rock and Roll.

The study of Rock and Roll also illustrates nicely the idea of geographic variation in patterns of acceptance and rejection. For example, although it was the American South that gave rise to most of the components of Rock and Roll, it was the last region to fully accept it. This was probably due to the fact that the South was satisfied with Blues and Country music while Rock and Roll took the relatively amusical North by storm. There are many other relevant factors here such as the degree of urbanization, level of racial integration, size of Black population, and existing musical talent, which affected the regional variation in the success of early Rock and Roll. To fully cover all of these factors would take a much larger study, but some generalizations can be made.

Since American music is a vast subject, I will concentrate on the verbal, or at least vocal, aspects of the evolution of Rock and Roll and will probably slight some very important developments such as jazz.

White Country and Western

There is an old Irish saying that the Celtic people were happy in war and sad in song and it was this Celtic heritage along with a strong English ballad influence that the Scots-Irish frontiersmen took with them into the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee and Kentucky. The most popular instrument at that time was the fiddle, which was replacing the more expensive pipes in Britain, and it was not until much later that guitars and banjos became common. Many old songs remained intact or only moderately changed in this region until the twentieth century, due to extreme isolation. As the area opened up and new instruments were developed and introduced, especially the banjo, dobro, and electric guitar, country mu-

sic evolved. The emergence and popularization of any new kind of music needs a patron and a center so that ideas may be exchanged and songs can be written and performed—in short, a place to facilitate personal contact. In this case “The Grand Old Opry” radio show became the focal point and Nashville became the center. The “Opry” began in 1925 and is the oldest regularly scheduled radio program in the United States. At first, most performers dropped in from the nearby Tennessee hills, so that Country music became sort of a commercialization of Appalachian folk music. Gradually the popularity of this music spread, at least in the White rural South, and soon Nashville became known as “Hillbilly Heaven” and aspiring young musicians from all over the rural South began to wander into town hoping to make it big.³ Country music became more and more eclectic as it was combined with the plaintive wails of White Texas cowboy songs and yodels to form Country and Western music (complete with fringe and cowboy hats—many new types of music have associated clothing styles). In spite of this broadening, Country music was still almost totally ignored in the North or else was looked down upon as “hillbilly trash.”

Black Music

There are two streams of Black music which can be identified here—the Gospel and the Blues. Although religious music was also important in White Country music, it was perhaps more important and more unique in Black music for several reasons. During the slavery, the Blacks of the South were allowed to be “Christianized” only by very fundamentalist religions that emphasized singing and praying and “pie in the sky” attitudes. Thus during the Great Awakening of the late 1700s and early 1800s, most plantation Blacks became inculcated with the highly emotional Baptist and Methodist religions of that era. Religious singing was very much a part of this heritage and Negro spirituals began to evolve. Although Negro spirituals were sung around the old plantation before the Civil War, it was only after the end of the war that the music became fully formed. As the Methodist and Baptist Churches split over slavery and as the Blacks were emanci-

pated, separate Black churches were formed and Black composers and Black Gospel choirs began to perform regularly. By the 1870s, Black Gospel choirs were touring the country. Meanwhile, the Northern churches (especially the Methodists) had begun to abandon their revivalistic fervor and to become solidly middle-class—looking down upon any kind of emotional display during a church service. Most White Americans thus lost touch with their religious musical heritage while Blacks took that heritage and combined it with their own musical tradition.

The other major stream of Black music came from the field hollers and chants of cotton pickers and other field hands—usually including such things as falsetto breaks and vocal twists and snaps. The African musical tradition is not simply one of a drum beat but also consists of a great deal of melody and, perhaps most importantly, the use of a statement by an individual and restatement by a chorus, or call and response. This style is still very popular in Black musical groups today, *i.e.*, three or four people behind the lead singer. Field hollers and songs also included a strange blue note, or the flatted third and seventh notes of the scale in any key—perhaps an attempt to adjust the European scale to African music.

The field holler-work song tradition was most pronounced in the Mississippi Delta cotton fields—perhaps due to the very high concentration of Blacks in that area and the fact that the river provided a communication link which helped standardize certain styles as Black workers visited many docks. In areas where the Black population was small and scattered, there was a greater probability of a shared Black-White musical culture.⁴ In the very early 1900s, an Alabama Negro named W. C. Handy moved to Mississippi and noticed the prevalence of the blue note work-songs and began to compose new ones and, more importantly, to write them down in a definite twelve-bar style which became the standard Blues form.⁵ Memphis, already the cotton center of the delta, became the Blues center as Blacks from Mississippi congregated there to load

³ Paul Hemphill, *The Nashville Sound* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 84.

⁴ Tony Russell, *Blacks, Whites, and Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), p. 32.

⁵ Phyl Garland, *The Sound of Soul* (Chicago, Ill.: Henry Regnery Company, 1969), p. 87.

cotton, find work, and exchange songs. Beale Street in Memphis became the Black musical equivalent of the "Opry" as far as personal contact and the exchange of ideas was concerned. The first Blues song, "Memphis Blues," was published in 1912, and in 1920 the first Black Blues record was made. New Orleans jazzmen such as Jelly Roll Morton looked down upon the Blues as crude and, although the two traditions were never completely separate, I feel that the more sophisticated urban, creole tradition of New Orleans jazz is, to some degree, a different story.⁶ Unlike jazz, which was immediately picked up by White musicians (The Original Dixieland Band, for example) and spread North to Chicago, the Blues with their crude, gutsy sound and often vulgar lyrics were largely ignored by White America. Although there was some Blues influence in jazz and swing, especially bouncy Blues like "St. Louis Blues," this represented a great modification of the original thing.

During the 1920s, most record companies had both White and "Race" labels and most "Race records" were available only in Black communities. Gradually the Blues spread out of the delta area and become popular throughout the Black South. The Blues were spread West to Texas by people like Huddy Ledbetter (Ledbelly) and Blind Lemon Jefferson, where they became known as the Texas Country Blues. The Blues also spread to the East to places like South Georgia where a new type of music evolved—the mixture of Gospel and Blues. Most Blues singers were "down and out" and did not mix socially with churchy Gospel people, but in Georgia, a fellow called Georgia Tom started writing Gospel tunes in a Blues form and it was in Georgia that Ray Charles was later able to blend the two perfectly.⁷ (See map.)

Meanwhile, although occasional Blues singers like Bessie Smith were able to make breakthroughs (the fact that only female Blues singers gained White popularity is interesting) most Black Blues singers did not make a dent in the White music market.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

The Establishment—Tin Pan Alley

Although Broadway had played around with Black musical comedy in the 1920s and many Black musicians were important in New York City, Black music was still not important there, nor was White Country music. Composers and performers in New York City were mostly New Yorkers (Black and White) writing and performing sophisticated songs for a very staid, conservative, and small middle class national market. A record was a hit in the 1930s if it sold only 20,000 copies. What Black performers there were either conformed to the shuffling Black stereotype or sang basically White songs. White composers were usually immigrant or second generation immigrant—often Jewish but sometimes Italian or Irish—trying to be American but at the same time urbane and sophisticated (some say many songs of the 1920s and 1930s carry minor strains of the Cantorial tradition). Lyrics such as

Thanks for the memory
Of your lips next to mine
Castles on the Rhine
The Parthenon, and moonlight on
The Hudson River line

were typical. Many songs required a smattering of knowledge of art history and Russian literature to be fully appreciated. New York City ran the Pop show while Blues and Country became more ingrained in much of Depression America.

The Turning Point—The 1940s

Two big events during the 1940s began to change the American music scene. First, the virtual monopoly of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers which had protected New York's ascendancy in the music market since 1914 was broken by a legal judgment. This opened broadcasting and recording channels to non-ASCAP composers and publishers, many of them unknowns outside the conventional music establishment of Tin Pan Alley, who catered to newly affluent Blacks and Whites working in war-related industries.⁸ After the war, New York found itself with competition. Nashville began recording songs like "Your

⁸ Jonathan Eisen, *The Age of Rock* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), p. 15.

Cheatin' Heart" and "Tennessee Waltz" which were able to break out of the limited Country market and make it big nationally. Black record companies also boomed.

Second, the mass migration of White and Black Southerners to the large urban centers of the North and the entrance of these newly "affluent" people into the music market meant that the middle class lost its monopoly on national taste. Country and Western bands were formed in nearly every Northern city to play for the White migrants, and in the Black parts of town, Rhythm and Blues was coming on strong. Rhythm and Blues perhaps first began in the 1930s in the Kansas City area as Blues "shouters" with Western Swing bands had to shout to be heard over the new electric guitars. After the war, however, Blues singers once more congregated in Memphis and what Keil calls the "Memphis synthesis" gave rise to modern urban Blues or Rhythm and Blues.⁹ Rhythm and Blues quickly became popular in such cities in the Midwest as Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago since those cities were the destinations of most migrating Blacks from the Mississippi Delta. (See map.)

Tin Pan Alley looked down on these "new" types of music as lower class, as to some extent they were, but more importantly, new geographic centers were now playing an ever-increasing role in the national music market. Park Avenue Fantasies and Penthouse Serenades were on their way out. American "folk" music was coming out into the open.

Rock and Roll is Born

In about 1950, Alan Freed took a job as a disc jockey in Cleveland, played typical pop tunes, and got an increasingly apathetic reaction to his radio show. One day while in a Black neighborhood record store he noticed that many young White customers were buying Rhythm and Blues records (still called "Race" records by the recording industry) and so he decided to play some on his show. In order to avoid the old racial connotations as much as possible, he borrowed a term used in many R & B hits (such as "my baby rocks me with a steady roll") and called his music "Rock and

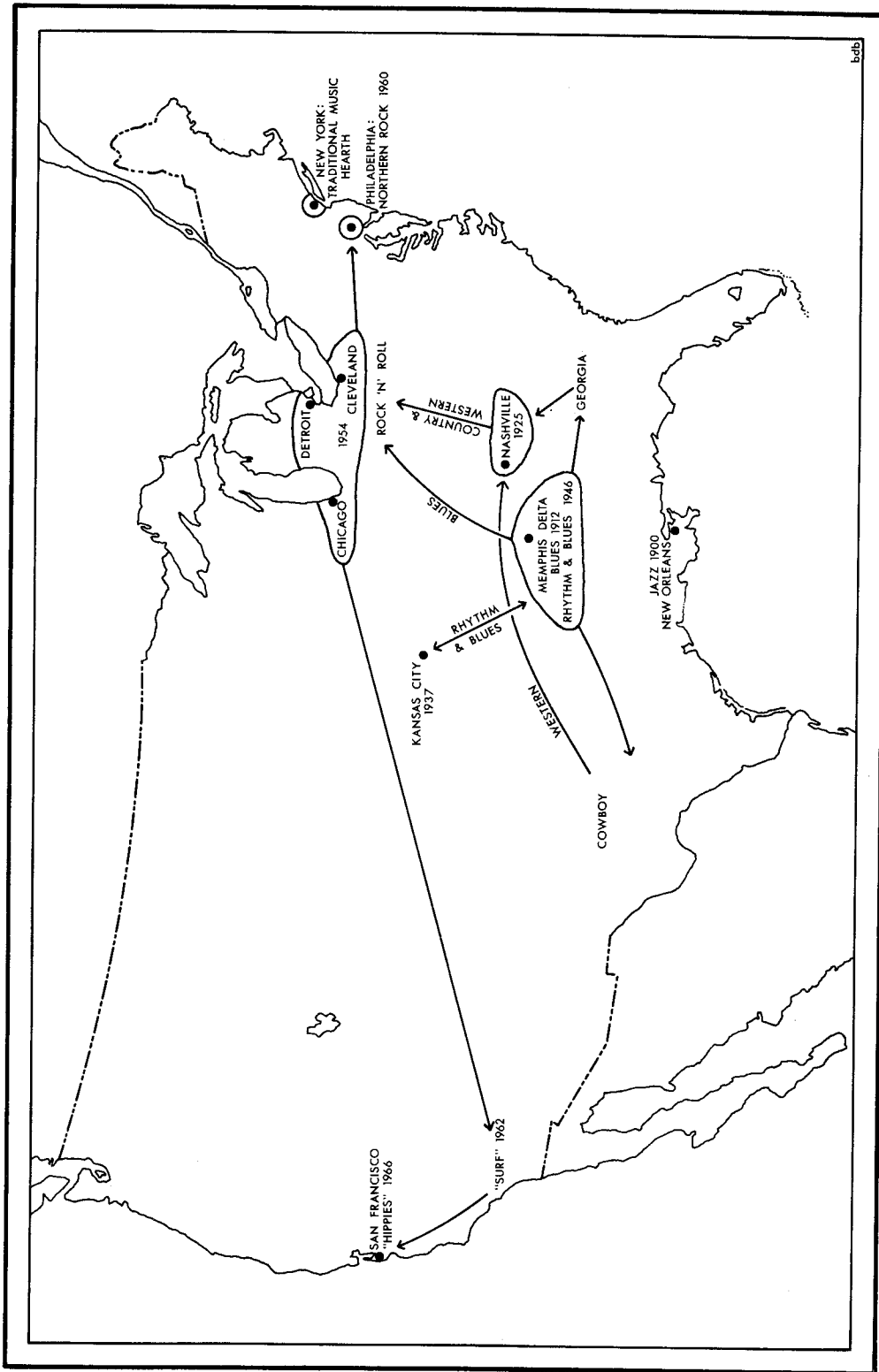
Roll" music. Freed was one of the first White commercial disc jockeys to play Rhythm and Blues and this, together with his new phrase and his dynamic promotion efforts, increased its popularity among young Whites. In 1951 and 1952, huge Rhythm and Blues concerts were held in the Cleveland area, and on one occasion 30,000 people showed up for 10,000 seats.¹⁰ Television was still off-limits for most Black music and so the movement remained rather local, or at least midwest-urban for a while. Soon, however, White Country and Western bands began to notice the appeal of Rhythm and Blues and started to play it—notably Bill Haley and the Comets in Detroit. With the recording of "Rock Around the Clock," and "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" in 1954, "Rock and Roll" was born. The meeting of Rhythm and Blues and Country and Western in the big cities of the Midwest brought about a new style of music that would become popular throughout the world. (See map.)

Rock and Roll brought about a boom of sorts in both of the historic centers of American music. In Memphis, Sun Records attracted people like Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley (both from the Memphis area) and had them listen to Blues and Rhythm and Blues in order to combine those sounds with their own White Country backgrounds. Bo Diddley was a big influence on Elvis' style and because Elvis was White, many doors were open to him in television and magazine coverage that were locked for Black performers. Meanwhile, in Nashville, people like the Everly Brothers were discarding their fringe and cowboy hats and adding Country harmony to Rhythm and Blues hits like "Lucille." Most of the songs sung by these early White Rock and Rollers were already hits in the Black R & B market but "Hound Dog" still took middle class America by surprise.

The reaction to the new sound was often not favorable. New Yorkers like Frank Sinatra called Rock and Roll "the martial music of juvenile delinquents" while the White music establishment searched frantically for clean-looking singers to cover the hits of the original artists, especially the Black ones. Pat Boone gained fame redoing hits by Black and boister-

⁹ Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 61.

¹⁰ Paul Dickson, "Eye's Rock Crammer," *Eye* (October 1968), p. 51.



The Geography of Rock and Roll Music

ous Little Richard, and even Perry Como's sleepy version of "Kokomo" was an attempt to hold back the tide. The television *Hit Parade* was a chaotic mess and it finally folded.

By 1957, Elvis and Bill Haley had paved the way for Black stars to gain national attention and Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Little Richard, and Lavern Baker became known to White audiences as well as Black. The practice of covering songs died as kids began to demand the originals. The Georgia center mentioned earlier was especially important in the introduction of Black talent—Little Richard, Ray Charles, James Brown, Otis Redding all being from Georgia. Perhaps Memphis Blacks were still a bit too basic for national tastes.

Radio also played a very important part in the popularization of the new sound in the mid-1950s. Top 40 radio shows (begun in Kansas City and Omaha in 1954) gained in importance as television took away old radio dramas and comedies. Mass media also played an important part in the popularization of Rock and Roll in England where Chuck Berry records had a tremendous influence on young people like John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

The middle class reaction, however, came on strong. Elvis was arrested in Florida on a morals charge and made to stand still in a tuxedo on the Ed Sullivan Show. Rock and Roll was banned on radio stations from Houston to New Haven and one Chicago disc jockey broke Rock and Roll records over the air. Southern ministers declared Rock and Roll to be a plot by the NAACP to mongrelize the races, and some scholars began to check into possible ties to communism and to prophesy the decline of the West. No dancing to Rock and Roll was allowed in Atlanta without written parental consent and Alan Freed was arrested in Boston on charges of inciting a riot. There was also a growing concern over the effect of earthy Black lyrics on middle class youngsters—"I Got a Woman," "Empty Bed Blues," "Annie Had a Baby," etc.

The Decline of Southern Rock

Southern Rock was Hard Rock,
Northern Rock was High School.¹¹

¹¹ Nick Cohn, *Rock, From the Very Beginning* (New York: Stein and Day, 1969), p. 51.

In the face of the middle class reaction, the Southern rural Whites and Ghetto Blacks who made up the list of most of the early Rock and Roll stars were too inflexible and perhaps too naive in the ways of show business to survive. Elvis was drafted, Chuck Berry was in and out of jail, Jerry Lee Lewis was censored for his marriage to a thirteen year-old, Little Richard decided to give up Rock and become a preacher, Buddy Holly was killed in a plane crash, Fats Domino retired, and Alan Freed was fired over payola scandals and died shortly thereafter. Philadelphia (Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*) emerged as the center for clean, wholesome, and almost exclusively White Rock and Roll. With the help of a national television show and countless fan magazines, several Philadelphia neighborhood kids were paraded out as stars—Fabian, Frankie Avalon, etc., which led to a clean, well-controlled type of music which I call "Disney Rock." "Long Tall Sally Jumped Back into the Alley" was replaced by Mouseketeer Annette's "Tall Paul":

Tall Paul is my love
Tall Paul is my dream
He's the captain of
The high school football team,

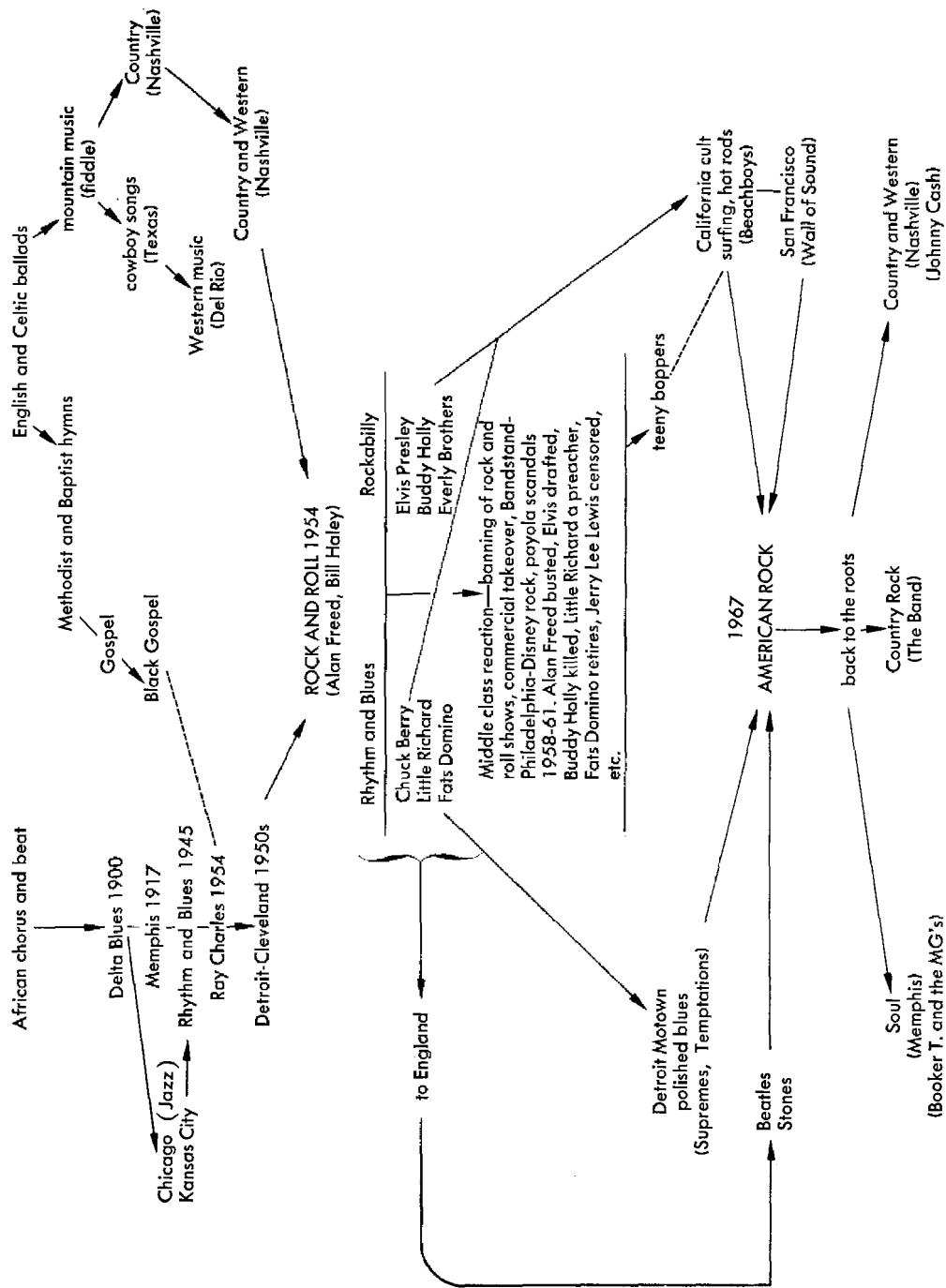
and long hair and sideburns disappeared. Novelty songs by the "Chipmunks" and endless "High School" songs filled in the gaps as the White north was not quite ready to produce its own true Rock and Roll. Many of the old Rock and Roll stars toured England and the Kingston Folk Trio arose as a possible alternative to commercial Rock and Roll. By 1962, however, Philadelphia was dying as a Rock and Roll center and two new geographic centers were gaining precedence—Los Angeles and Detroit. (See map.)

Rock and Roll Comes Back as Rock

In Detroit, the Gospel-Blues combination emerged in a highly polished, smooth, but definitely Black sound known as Motown. Again local talent provided the sound as the auto city ghetto housed Diana Ross and the Supremes, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, The Temptations, Aretha Franklin, Little Stevie Wonder, Martha and the Vandellas, etc.

Meanwhile, a new folk culture was growing up on the West Coast based on youth, hot-rods,

THE EVOLUTION OF ROCK



and surfing, and a new style of music evolved to reflect this life-style. The Beachboys, Jan and Dean, the Suns, etc. all produced song after song about beaches, waves, and camshafts. Although a far cry from the Memphis Blues, this music was generally good and succeeded in presenting a rather vivid image of some aspects of teenage life in Southern California.

Both of these types of music were smooth and commercial but the music of Los Angeles and Detroit was much better, and more real, than that of Philadelphia, and the Annette-Fabian style began to disappear.

Enter the Beatles

An analysis of the role of place in British Rock would also be relevant here since the Irish-North Country city of Liverpool gave rise to many of the early groups and was, in a sense, peripheral to the musical culture hearth at London just as Memphis and Nashville were to New York. However, suffice it to say here that the Beatles and, especially, the Rolling Stones, re-imported Black sounds and Black lyrics to the United States and for the first time such things gained wide and open appeal in this country. "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," and "Let's Spend the Night Together" are phrases right out of Memphis 1920 but as Muddy Waters said of the 1964 Rock boom, "They had to go all the way to England to get it and here it was right in their own backyard all the time." This time the tremendous popularity of White singers singing Black lyrics with English accents really opened the floodgates for Black talent. The roots were exposed.

Memphis has been revived as a recording center for Soul Music, which is generally less polished than Motown. Local talent again has played an important part as Booker T. and the M.G.'s, Carla Thomas, Rufus Thomas, and B. B. King are all from the Memphis area. Nashville is also stronger than ever with 40 recording studios, 400 music publishing houses, 29 talent agencies, and 1500 union musicians.¹² "Music City, U.S.A." has also become the home of nationally televised "Country" TV shows.

¹² Hemphill, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

Rock Comes of Age

Today, Rock is part of the establishment. It is no longer a "lower class" type of music associated with ghettos and greasy-haired hubcap stealers. The Broadway show "Hair" is popular throughout the world and musicians of all kinds are playing songs originally produced by "Rock" groups. The roots of Rock have also been exposed and Rhythm and Blues and Country and Western are now more popular than ever in all parts of the nation. Rock and Roll brought real American music into the spotlight. It was here all the time but its rise was a long time coming, geographically as well as historically.

Rock Music and Cultural Convergence

Rock music is now popular throughout the world but there is some controversy about what the result of this will be. Many nations look at the spread of American music as a sort of "cultural imperialism" and loud objections have been raised, from Europe to Asia and Africa. In Africa, where "The James Brown Show" is fantastically popular, Tanzania announced it had outlawed "Soul Music" and that it would take immediate action against Soul nightclubs that continued to ignore the decree.¹³ Even North Vietnam is worried about what it terms "Imperialistic records" which "clandestinely popularize musical pieces fraught with profane, romantic feelings, stimulating the bestiality of men."¹⁴ Ireland has ruled that dance halls in its extreme rural Gaelic West may have only traditional bands rather than the otherwise dominant Rock Showbands.

Some see this increasing cultural homogeneity as bad in that the world-wide diffusion of American popular culture is dulling regional variations and destroying ancient musical traditions. On the other hand, while this is probably true, there may be some benefits for the cause of world brotherhood as well. For example, I arrived in Peru during the height of the "Tuna boat tension" fully expecting to meet with at least a few cold stares. Instead, I was nearly

¹³ J. K. Obatala, "Soul Music in Africa," *The Black Scholar* (February 1971), p. 8.

¹⁴ "Hanoi Youth Become Hip; Adults Irate," *Los Angeles Times* (January 1, 1971).

mobbed on a main street by a group of teenagers who wished to know what I thought of certain American and English Rock groups. As Chuck Berry so aptly sang in the mid-1950s, "C'est la vie, say the old folks, it goes to show you never can tell."

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