FROM RACE RECORDS TO ROCK ‘N’ ROLL:
ELVIS, SUN, AND THE
PRODUCTION OF CULTURE PERSPECTIVE

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Research Problem

The object of this thesis is to understand the role of the commercial recording and broadcast radio industries in increasing acculturation between black and white musical traditions as made manifest in the rise of Elvis Presley and the national explosion of rock ‘n’ roll during the mid-1950s. As both the most commercially successful of the first generation of rock ‘n’ roll performers as well as one of its most controversial for his heavy reliance on unmistakably “black” performance practice and musical material, Elvis provides an illuminative figure for study. Rather than attributing the revolutionary aesthetic and cultural transformations of rock ‘n’ roll to the single stroke of genius of a gifted individual (e.g., Elvis), or, conversely, to the “inevitable” emergence of the musical manifestation of underlying social or political energies (e.g., the Civil Rights Movement) in the American public, I argue that the practices that spawned the hybridized rock ‘n’ roll aesthetic may be understood more accurately when viewed in detailed historical contexts in which they developed and were implemented. To this end I employ Richard Peterson’s six-facet production of culture perspective to show how the overlap of technological, legal and regulatory, structural, organizational, market, and occupational factors facilitated increased cross-cultural exchange between black and white musicians in the postwar popular music industry.
**Historical Background**

The oft-repeated quotation—"If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars"—credited to producer and Sun Records founder Sam Phillips by his secretary Marion Keisker has come to be one of the most famous lines in rock ‘n’ roll lore.\(^1\) Although Phillips himself later denied ever having actually made the statement, it has since been enshrined as a quasi-prophetic vision of his discovery of Elvis Presley (1935-1977) and the commercial frenzy of the mid-1950s rock ‘n’ roll explosion.\(^2\) Regardless of the quotation’s veracity, the issues it encapsulates concerning race, authenticity, ownership, and exploitation in the popular music industry in the Jim-Crow South are woven deeply into the historical fabric of rock ‘n’ roll. A number of familiar questions surrounding these issues continue to generate debate among historians, musicologists, and fans alike. Was rock ‘n’ roll a black or white creation? Should it be perceived as the result of genuine acculturation and innovation or of stylistic plagiarism by whites copying blacks? Were Elvis and Phillips sympathetic toward the music of black Americans or did they just cash in? Arguments in this arena have tended to reinforce a dialectical view of white and black music in the postwar South. Closer interrogation of this dialectic, however, brings up further questions that the above-mentioned debate has often only skirted. By which structures and mechanisms was the separation between black and white styles established and maintained? Through which processes and channels did stylistic interchange occur? Why would some of the most intense interchange occur in one of the most violently racist areas in the country at

\(^1\) Sam Phillips, quoted in Peter Guralnick, *Feel Like Going Home: Portraits in Blues and Rock ‘n’ Roll*

that time? In this study I contend that significant insight into these underlying questions can be obtained through examination of shifting conditions and practices in the American record and radio industries after World War II.

From 1954 and 1955 Elvis Presley cut five singles for Sam Phillips’s small independent company, Sun Records. With each of the releases featuring a rhythm-and-blues song on one side and a country song on the other, the records physically—as well as musically—represented a meeting of white and black styles at a time when black music was systematically excluded from mainstream radio programming and when the “specialty” record and radio markets were segregated along black and white racial lines. After receiving radio play on Dewey Phillips’s Red, Hot, and Blue radio show on Memphis’s WHBQ, Elvis’s first single, a version of obscure rhythm-and-blues singer Arthur Crudup’s “That’s All Right,” with a B-side of a hyped-up version of Bill Monroe’s bluegrass standard “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” rapidly became a regional crossover hit selling 20,000 copies and reaching number four on the local Memphis charts within a few months. The stylistic racial ambiguity that these records engendered initially caused concern among promoters and deejays unsure of how to market this black/white musical hybrid. Elvis, however, continued to gain record sales and regional radio play with the release of his next two singles, “Good Rockin’ Tonight” with B-side “I Don’t Care if the Sun Don’t Shine” and “Milk-cow Blues Boogie” with B-side “You’re a Heartbreaker.” By the time his last two Sun records were released in 1955 he was beginning to chart nationally and was catching the attention of major labels. The demand for Elvis had begun to outstrip the modest production and distribution capacities of the Sun label, and

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3 The last two of Elvis’s Sun singles were “Baby Let’s Play House” with B-side “I’m Left, You’re Right, She’s Gone” and “I Forgot to Remember to Forget” with B-Side “Mystery Train.”

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in November 1955 Phillips sold Elvis’s contract to RCA records for $40,000, the highest price paid for a recording contract up to that point.

Elvis’s move from Sun to RCA catalyzed the rock ‘n’ roll explosion that overtook the American popular music industry during the mid-1950s. Like the subsequent emergence of soul, funk, punk, and hip hop, rap, and grunge, rock ‘n’ roll was a creative movement that progressed from the fringes of the mainstream record and radio industries to the center of a major cultural phenomenon. It sprang from an amalgam of musical traditions such as blues, rhythm and blues, and hillbilly music that the mainstream industry had formerly either ignored or actively attempted to suppress. This music made it into the mainstream only after a number of independent firms like Sun, catering to niche audiences, showed the commercial potential of these markets in such a way as to compel the major national labels to buy into, or in the case of Elvis, to buy out what they had created. While the most innovative phase of rock ‘n’ roll took place in a relatively brief time span, the movement represented more than a passing fad. It instead initiated, and was initiated by, transformative changes in the system of production of popular music whose effects on the music industry outlived many of the personalities, careers, politics, and genres that initially spawned it.

Literature Survey

Neo-Marxist critical theory and structural-functionalism represent the two dominant streams of inquiry running through the evolution of media studies. In the first section of this survey I highlight central studies and arguments representing both theoretical orientations and situate the production of culture perspective within the context of larger
strands of debate in cultural theory. I then show the variety and scope of studies that have employed the production of culture perspective and address issues raised by critics of the perspective. In the third part of this survey I give an overview of musicological literature pertaining to Elvis’s early career and twentieth-century popular music according to its relevance to each area of the six-facet production of culture model. Finally, I provide a review of historical and biographical background sources.

Theoretical Materials

With the rise of mass communication and the acceleration of technological modes of reproduction and dissemination for cultural goods in the first half of the twentieth century, apparent tensions between “culture” (e.g., the arts, science, religion, and news media) and “industry” (i.e., the institutions that facilitate and profit from mass production of cultural goods) came into sharp focus in the social sciences. With this, the task of devising analytical frameworks to examine the impact of mass media on cultural production became a central challenge for scholars in the fields of media studies and cultural sociology. Several fundamental theoretical shifts have occurred over the course of this debate. These have arisen from changing social, political, economic, and technological realities as well as from challenges posed by scholars to dominant perspectives in place within these fields at the given time.4

Two theoretical perspectives dominated early debate. The first critiques of mass culture came from disciples of the Frankfurt School. Notable works from this interdisciplinary collective, established at the Institut für Sozialforschung in Frankfurt am Main during the early 1920s were Walter Benjamin’s consideration of film and Theodor Adorno’s essays on mass culture, popular music, and radio. The term “culture industry” originated in Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s 1944 book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the chapter titled “Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” Coming from a neo-Marxist orientation, they argued that the aims of “industry”—profit, efficiency, and predictability—were fundamentally at odds with the supposedly autonomous “cultural” values of beauty, authenticity, and art. Emphasizing the fascistic potential of the standardized, “assembly-line” mode of cultural production, they viewed the culture industry as an instrument of social control that was wielded over an accepting, uncritical consumer public by industry elites who controlled the economic and technological means of production.

Counter to the neo-Marxist view was the structural-functionalist or “mainstream” sociological tradition of mass culture studies, which dominated media studies in the

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United States. While the Marxist position argued that values of the cultural “superstructure” reflected the domineering lower-level demands of the material and economic “base,” functionalist arguments put forth by sociologists such as Talcott Parsons in *The Structure of Social Action: A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers*\(^\text{10}\) and Parsons and Edward Shils in *Toward a General Theory of Action: Theoretical Foundations for the Social Sciences*\(^\text{11}\) took the inverse position. In their view the system of production was the result of widely held cultural norms and values, which are formed and evolve more or less independently from other elements of social and economic structure.\(^\text{12}\) From this perspective Parsons in *The Social System* focused on the power of cultural value systems to shape social institutions and viewed media as one of many systems working in conjunction to stabilize social structure.\(^\text{13}\)

Although taking stances at opposite ends of the theoretical spectrum, both the conflict model of the Neo-Marxists and the consensus model of the functionalists rested on the base / superstructure model of industry and mass culture.\(^\text{14}\) The base / superstructure paradigm, however, failed to account adequately for many of the major changes taking place in the entertainment industry during the 1950s, such as the fragmentation of the radio and phonograph industries in the wake of the general accessibility of television and the breakup of the Hollywood film studio system due to antitrust action. During the

\(^{10}\) See Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action: A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers* (New York: MacMillan, 1937).


\(^{12}\) See Anthony Giddens, *Politics, Sociology and Social Theory: Encounters with Classical and Contemporary Social Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 208-09.

\(^{13}\) See Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951).

war and postwar years, a growing body of empirical research in mass media sociology further challenged the view of a quasi-omnipotent culture industry. Leading research in this area was the functionalist-oriented Office of Radio Research at Columbia University (renamed the Bureau of Applied Social Research in 1944) under the directorship of Paul Lazarsfeld. Studies from the Office of Radio Research included case studies on propaganda, \(^{15}\) voting habits, \(^{16}\) and radio. \(^{17}\) Drawing on findings from this research, Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton in their essay “Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action”\(^ {18}\) and Joseph T. Klapper in his book *The Effects of Mass Media* \(^ {19}\) questioned the potency of mass communication in influencing short-term behavioral changes. Elihu Katz along with Lazarsfeld codified these findings in the landmark essay “Personal Influence.”\(^ {20}\) There they argued for a “limited effect” perspective and introduced what they termed the “two-step flow of communications” model to show that audiences are more readily persuaded when media messages are transmitted through face-to-face


interaction with “opinion leaders” (community members with access to a wider range of media information than the “opinion followers” whom they influence) rather than directly from the media outlets themselves.

In the 1960s and 1970s the base/superstructure model came into question among neo-Marxist circles as well, primarily from theorists who rejected the notion that corporations maintain creative control solely through ownership of the means of production. In his writing “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” Raymond Williams dismissed “literal readings” of the theory and proposed a change of focus in mass culture inquiries from “the components of a product” to “the conditions of a practice.” In his article “Rethinking the Base and Superstructure Metaphor,” Stuart Hall considered analytical flaws of the base/superstructure model by outlining its historical usages and deconstructing its theoretical logic.

While the base/superstructure model gradually fell into disuse during the 1970s, concern over the impact of production systems on cultural forms continued to grow. The theme of production was taken up by neo-Marxist theorists in the emerging fields of British cultural studies and the political economy school in Europe as it received renewed attention in functional sociology in the United States as well. This foment led to the introduction of the “production of culture perspective.” Taken together, the production-oriented studies emerging at this time demonstrated a broad theoretical shift of focus from the earlier preoccupation with macro-level economic relations and organizational

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structure to a micro-level focus highlighting the importance of human agency and the cultural meaning of creative activities within the constraints and opportunities of larger social and economic institutions.\textsuperscript{23}

From the field of British cultural studies, Raymond Williams in \textit{Television: Technology and Cultural Form} gave a social and technological history of television by comparing and contrasting the development of the medium in the United Kingdom and the United States. Arguing against a technologically deterministic viewpoint, Williams showed how sometimes-conflicting envisioned goals of technicians, sellers of sets, and programmers shaped the nature of the medium and its consumption practices.\textsuperscript{24} In “For a Political Economy of Mass Communication” political economy theorists Graham Murdock and Peter Golding discounted the idea that audience response could be “pre-programmed” or predicted due to the volatility of demand in the market for cultural goods. In this essay they also contended that, as culture becomes more and more commoditized under capitalism, cultural symbols must be understood according to the economic logic and contradictions inherent in capitalist production.\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, functional sociologist Paul Hirsch’s study of book publishers, record companies, and motion picture firms titled “Processing Fads and Fashion” also affirmed the instability and uncertainty inherent in cultural markets. In this work Hirsch devised a “filter-flow” model to show how these industries coped with market insecurity by filtering artistic “raw material” from indi-

\textsuperscript{23} Paul du Gay, \textit{Production of Culture}, 102.


individual artists to the public through a complex system of “organization sets,” which operate with varying degrees of independence from the economic base. 26 Richard A. Peterson challenged Hirsch's filter-flow model in his 1976 manifesto, “The Production of Culture: A Prolegomenon.” 27 There he introduced the production of culture perspective to examine communities explicitly dedicated to symbolic production such as art, science, and religion. 28 Peterson employed analytical methods drawn from the study of organizations, occupations, networks, and communities to contend that elements of culture are not merely the works of individual artists filtered to the public but are deliberately shaped as they are passed down to various occupational groups along the production and distribution chain.

Much of Peterson’s subsequent research from the production of culture perspective has dealt with institutional influence in popular music. In “The Production of Cultural Change: The Case of Contemporary Country Music,” he analyzed the interdependence of the broadcast radio and commercial country music and assessed its impact on artists’ careers, record making practices, and the music itself. 29 Subsequently, in “Why 55? Explaining the Advent of Rock Music,” he employed the approach tracing the transformation of the swing / crooner era of popular music to the rise of rock after World


28 Paul du Gay, Production of Culture, 99.

War II. In this article he identified six facets of production: law, technology, industry structure, organization structure, occupational career, and market, which combine to shape symbol production. In *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* he employed this model and formulated a “decision chain” to show how personnel working along this chain take a pragmatic, strategic, and commercially-oriented approach dictated by a “product image.”

From its introduction in the mid-1970s up to the present day the production of culture perspective has grown continually in prominence in the field of cultural analysis. Scholars in increasingly diverse areas of study and from divergent theoretical backgrounds have applied the model in their works. The topic of popular music has remained an essential subject for production of culture studies. Some of these include Stith Bennett’s study of rock, George H. Lewis’s comparison of country music and British punk communities, Mark Newman’s study of soul, Nelson George’s study of rhythm and blues, Jennifer C. Lena’s study of rap, and Deena Weinstein’s study of heavy metal.

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metal.\textsuperscript{38} Outside of the sociology of music it has also been utilized in studies of fashion,\textsuperscript{39} gastronomy,\textsuperscript{40} restaurants,\textsuperscript{41} digital media,\textsuperscript{42} and the arts.\textsuperscript{43}

As the production of culture perspective’s primary focus is the social and institutional grounding of culture, it can be understood as functionalist in a broad sense. Peterson and other proponents of the perspective, however, have encouraged an inclusive conception of the approach and have promoted it as a conduit for dialogue between empirically centered “mainstream” sociology and other interpretive based methods of cultural analysis such as semiotics, aesthetics, and critical theory.\textsuperscript{44} Both Paul du Gay and Diana Crane have written book-length introductory overviews of the perspective.\textsuperscript{45} Other reviews of the production of culture perspective include Peterson and Anand’s article “The Production of Culture Perspective”\textsuperscript{46} and Marco Santoro’s essay “Culture as (and after) Production.”\textsuperscript{47}


\textsuperscript{42} See Eric Klinenberg and Claudio Benzecry, “Introduction: Cultural Production in a Digital Age,” \textit{Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science} LIX/7 (January 2005), 6-18.


\textsuperscript{44} See Marco Santoro, “Culture as (and after) Production,” \textit{Cultural Sociology} II/7 (2008), 7-31.


The discourse between production of culture proponents and those from divergent theoretical positions has generated its share of debate. Critics such as Mark Gottdeiner in “Hegemony and Mass Culture: A Semiotic Approach” 48 and Ron Eyerman and Magnus Ring in “Toward a New Sociology of Art Worlds: Bringing Meaning Back In” 49 have argued on epistemological grounds that the production of culture perspective emphasizes the effects of organizational factors and systems of production while ignoring the importance of interpretation and meaning of symbolic objects. A second charge has been that the perspective’s focus on production neglects the importance of consumers and fans in influencing the nature of cultural symbols. Victoria Anderson in her book Sociology of the Arts also has contended that the perspective fails to recognize a difference between cultural symbols and other types of commodities, in effect ignoring “what is special about art.” 50

Defending the production of culture perspective against the first charge, Paul DiMaggio asserted in his essay “The Production of Scientific Change: Richard Peterson and the Institutional Turn in Cultural Sociology” that, while the interpretation of specific texts is not part of the production of culture perspective, the task of identifying and interpreting meanings is an “inevitable moment” in the course of explaining the how and why of symbolic production systems in detailed local contexts. 51 Concerning the perspective’s


emphasis on production over consumption, Peterson and Anand in their writing, “The Production of Culture Perspective,” maintained that, while questions of reception *per se* are beyond the scope of the perspective, reception can be better understood within the context of the production. In this same article Peterson and Anand also confirmed the claim that the production of culture perspective fails to distinguish between institutions of symbolic and other types of production systems but argued that this aspect of the approach is useful for uncovering the “constructed nature of collective representations, values, and other aspects of culture.”

The other main point of criticism for the production of culture perspective has come from a political standpoint. Critics such as Norman Denzin and Mark Gottdeiner have pointed to what they saw as a politically conservative, socially orthodox bias of the production of culture approach. They claimed that the perspective lacks a critical stance toward culture and society and fails to address issues of power, exploitation, and hegemony in the culture industries. Regarding these criticisms, although the production of culture perspective is not associated with an explicit critical orientation, a number of studies have shown it to be amenable to critical approaches. Several such studies addressed the topic of censorship. Undertaking a broad survey of censorship practices, Sue Curry Jansen in her book *Censorship: The Knot That Binds Power and Knowledge*, has examined hegemonic practices in cultures from ancient Greece to the


53 Ibid.


United States showing how knowledge is shaped both directly and indirectly by those in power.\(^56^\) Steve Jones in the essay “Ban(ned) in the USA: Popular Music and Censorship,” analyzed how censorship in popular music constrains freedom of expression.\(^57^\) Mabel Berezin in “Culture, State and Theater in Fascist Italy,”\(^58^\) as well as Jeffry Goldfarb in The Persistence of Freedom: The Sociological Implications of Polish Student Theater,\(^59^\) studied specific forms of censorship in theater under different political regimes, and Steve Dubin in a collection of essays, Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions, addressed censorship in the visual arts.\(^60^\) Several production of culture studies have also dealt with issues of power and exploitation in the culture industry. Todd Gitlin’s study of television, Inside Prime Time\(^61^\) revealed the systematic exploitation of creative artists in the television industry while John Ryan and Peterson’s study of country music, “The Product Image: The Fate of Creativity in Country Music Songwriting,”\(^62^\) highlighted the exploitation of songwriters. Gaye Tuchman in her book Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change showed the exploitation


of women by the publishing industry, while Dowd and Byler in “Charting Race: The Success of Black Performers in the Mainstream Recording Market” revealed systematic practices in the recording industry to suppress ethnic minorities.

Musicological Materials: The Six-Facet Model

In this section I review the body of literature concerning the popular music industry in the United States during the twentieth century according to its relevance to each of the six facets of the production of culture model introduced by Peterson in “Why 55?”: technology, law and regulation, industry structure, organizational structure, occupational careers, and market. Finally, I review historical, biographical, and other musicological sources related to Elvis’s early career and the history of early rock ‘n’ roll.

Scholars from an array of fields have linked developments in music technology with changes in popular music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Many have focused on the impact of technology on consumption and dissemination. Examining the role of phonograph recordings and broadcast radio in the formation and dissemination of bluegrass music, Robert Cantwell in his book Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound identified an “aural” tradition emerging in the field of “race” and “hillbilly” records in the 1920s, based on a technological, not a social foundation. In “Not Just the Same Old Show on My Radio: The Role of Radio in the Diffusion of Black Music among Whites in the South of the United States of America, 1920 to 1960,”


Robert Kloosterman and Chris Quispel explored how black radio programming in the segregated South facilitated the adoption of black styles by whites such as Elvis by bridging the social gap between black music and young white audiences. Carl Belz documented the significance of the 45 rpm record in the emergence of rock music in his book *The Story of Rock*.

Scholars have also focused on the influence of technology on music making and production practices. In an aesthetic analysis of rock music, *Rhythm and Noise*, Theodore Gracyk argued that the elevation of the recording to primary status in rock music has been a principal aspect guiding the evolution of the style and practice in the idiom. Paula Lockhart in the essay “A History of Early Microphone Singing, 1925-1939” revealed the essential role of microphone technology in the development of the soft-voiced crooning style of Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby and the decline of the full-voiced style of previous recording stars. Historicizing and aesthetically analyzing the introduction of reverb and echo in early hillbilly, southern country blues, big band, western swing, Hawaiian guitar music as well as postwar country, pop, blues, and novelty recordings, Peter Doyle argued that such sonic effects constitute an integral musical component of

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these recordings. Steve Waksman examined the broad cultural and musical impact of the electric guitar in his book *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* by exploring how electronically manipulated approaches to sound articulate racialized and gendered identities.

Legal issues in three primary areas—governmental regulation, patent law, and copyright law—have significantly influenced major developments in both the broadcast radio and the phonograph record industries during the twentieth century. Highlighting the series of patent law disputes between RCA and Columbia known as “the battle of the speeds,” Greg Milner in the book *Perfecting Sound Forever* outlined how RCA’s 45 rpm record came to be adopted by the record industry as the standard format for the singles-oriented pop market. Focusing on the impact of copyright law on the United States music industry, John Ryan in his book *The Production of Culture in the Music Industry: The ASCAP-BMI Controversy* showed how the ascendance of BMI in the early 1940s set the stage for the emergence of country and western and rhythm and blues in the next decade by breaking ASCAP’s monopoly on publishing rights and facilitating the proliferation of “race” and “hillbilly” artists, which ASCAP had previously excluded.

Examining the changing relationship between the broadcast radio industry and the Federal Communications Commission between the end of World War I and the mid-

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1970s, Robert J. Williams in his study “The Politics of American Broadcasting: Public Purposes and Private Interests” traced how during this period governmental regulatory practice for radio evolved in response to rapid technological and commercial change. Scott De Veaux showed how industry decentralization resulting from the American Federation of Musicians recording ban (1942-1943) fostered the rise of hundreds of new small independent labels specializing in “race,” “hillbilly,” Latin-American, polka, small-combo jazz, and other non-mainstream genres neglected by the major record companies up to that point.

Over the course of the twentieth century the commercial music industry underwent fundamental structural changes as sheet music publishers came to be replaced by the recording and broadcast radio industries as the main purveyors of popular music. A comprehensive history of the American commercial broadcasting industry from the advent of telegraphy to the rise of the internet is found in Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross’s Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting. Focusing on the influence of technological transformations on practices of music production and consumption in the article “From Music Publishing to MP3: Music and Industry in the Twentieth Century,” Reebee Garofalo recognized the rise of rock music in the 1950s as a major factor in cultural and structural shifts in the music industry moving power from firms based on sheet music publication in the first half of the century to those based on

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recorded music during the latter half. Another comprehensive historical account of this transition is found in Russell Sanjek and David Sanjek’s *American Popular Music Business in the 20th Century* in which the authors traced the evolution of marketing practices that resulted from major technological shifts in the American popular music industry. Stewart Long’s article “Technological Change and Institutional Response: The Creation of American Broadcasting” illustrated how the technology of broadcast radio came to be absorbed into the existing structure of U. S. business becoming a privately owned and operated industry based on the sales of advertisements. During the postwar years a series of rapid structural changes in both the record and radio industries changed the face of the popular music industry. Examining these changes, Charlie Gillett in *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll* connected the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll with the development of a dual structure in the American record industry between 1948 and 1958 comprised of numerous small independent labels cultivating black styles and major labels diluting it in the interest of mainstream commercial appeal. In their study "Cycles in Symbolic Production: The Case of Popular Music" Peterson and David Berger recognized similar trends that developed in the broadcast radio industry during this period. They argued that reduced industry concentration due to weakened mechanisms of major-label market control in the mid-1950s gave unprecedented exposure to

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specialty record labels proliferating on the margins of the mainstream industry. Phillip H. Ennis in *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in Popular Music* gave a detailed historical account of the industry transformations that brought formerly separate traditions of pop, black pop, country pop, jazz, folk, and gospel together culminating in the rise of rock ‘n’ roll during the mid 1950s.

Several studies have highlighted the role of organizational structures on competitive strategies for firms and companies within the music industry. Concentrating on the transformation of the organizational structure of the United States broadcast radio industry up to the 1960s in “Institutional Change and the Transformation of Interorganizational Fields: An Organizational History of the U.S. Radio Broadcasting Industry,” Huseyin Lebleci, Gerald R. Salancik, Anne Copay, and Tom King have shown how industry practices first developed by fringe organizations to manage competitive pressure and shifting coordination problems have subsequently been adopted and institutionalized as “conventions” by major firms. In “Entrepreneurship in Organizations: Evidence from the Popular Music Industry” Peterson and Berger examined how entrepreneurial styles of leadership are strategically instituted by large corporations to deal with times of high market turbulence. Timothy Dowd, in two articles: “Concentration and Diversity

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Revisited: Production Logics and the U.S. Mainstream Recorded Music Market, 1940-1990," and “Musical Diversity and the U.S. Mainstream Recording Market, 1950-1990," explored the role of decentralized production strategies in mitigating the negative effect of industry concentration on diversity of popular music programming. Other scholars have explored the effects of organizational structure on a more localized level. Howard S. Becker in Art Worlds examined how the organizational structure of artistic communities shapes both the form and content of creative works and asserted that an “art world” includes all participants whose coordinated activities contribute to the realization of a cultural product. Keith Negus in Music Genres and Corporate Culture recognized distinctive organizational structures in genres of rap, country, salsa, and world music and assessed how these structures constrain and contribute to the nature of the musical product.

The production of art and media for mass consumption requires a large number of processes apart from the traditional creative activities of composition or performance. Recognizing this, sociologists and musicologists have sought to examine how differing occupational careers emerge and develop and how cultural products are shaped by participants in various roles along the production chain. Focusing on this aspect of artistic production, sociologist Howard S. Becker in the essay “Art as Collective Action” explored how the adoption of artistic conventions facilitate cooperation between artists and

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87 See Howard S. Becker, Art Worlds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

support personnel by specifying the roles of participants involved in the processes of production and dissemination. 

89 Looking to the music industry specifically, Paul Hirsch in *The Structure of the Popular Music Industry* identified six characteristic occupational roles that facilitate processes of production and consumption in popular music: “Artist,” “Agent,” “Producer,” “Promoters,” “Gatekeepers,” and “the Public.”

90 Stith Bennett, drawing on his own sociological fieldwork on local rock bands in *On Becoming a Rock Musician*, contended that musicians adopt the role of rock musician outside of formal training or educational institutions through a process of self-socialization involving play-acting and imitating the sounds of recordings.

91 Albin J. Zak in *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* stressed the vital creative influence of recordists, engineers, and producers who, in collaboration with musicians, shape the sonic and technical properties of the recorded music during the record making process.

92 In *The Dee-jays* Arnold Passman detailed the careers of disc jockeys, such as Allan Freed and Wolf-man Jack, and examined their importance in shaping audience tastes during the rise of rock ‘n’ roll.

The emergence of new markets, as well as decision makers’ conceptions of these markets have played decisively in the trajectory of the popular music industry in the


United States. Tom McCourt has shown in "Bright Lights Big City: A Brief History of Rhythm and Blues, 1945-1957" that increasing economic prosperity among African Americans in the years after World War II along with market segmentation in the wake of the advent of television led to the adoption of black programming formats in radio and the proliferation of record labels devoted to black styles. Anand and Peterson in their study, "When Market Information Constitutes Fields: Sensemaking of Markets in the Commercial Music Industry," have examined the role of market information regimes in the formation of competitive fields showing the Billboard music chart to be a key mechanism around which market activity in popular music has coalesced. Joel M. Podolny, focusing on market uncertainty, has highlighted the role of markets in granting legitimacy and prestige to products, and the function of cross-market networks in providing the “plumbing” by which products and practices are imitated or transmitted from one market to another.

**Musicological, Biographical, and Historical Background**

The scope and variety of studies dedicated to American popular music has increased continually since the mid-1970s. In one of the first book-length musicological studies of American popular song *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*, (1979) Charles Hamm traced the evolution of the genre while assessing the impact of styles such as

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96 See Joel M. Podolny, “Networks as the Pipes and Prisms of the Market,” *American Journal of Sociology* CVII/1 (July 2001), 33-60.
rhythm and blues and rock ‘n’ roll on the tradition during the 1950s. Originally published in 1976, Greil Marcus’s book *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll*, whose final chapter is dedicated to early Elvis, has become a touchstone for subsequent studies on rock ‘n’ roll. Other prominent musicological surveys include Robert Palmer’s *Rock & Roll: An Unruly History* and Reebee Garofalo’s *Rockin’ Out: Popular Music in the USA*. Focusing on Elvis specifically, Michael T. Bertrand in *Race, Rock, and Elvis* examined the impact of rock ‘n’ roll and Elvis on the cultural and social upheavals taking place in the South from 1945 and 1960, while Craig Morrison’s study of the rockabilly style *Go Cat Go!: Rockabilly Music and Its Makers* provided a historical overview of the origins and spread of the rockabilly genre during the mid-1950s.

The body of biographical writing on Elvis is, of course, enormous, to the degree that book-length bibliographies, such as John Whisler’s *Elvis Presley: Reference Guide and Discography* and Patsy Guy Hammontree’s *Elvis Presley: A Bio-Bibliography* have been dedicated solely to the relevant literature. Peter Guralnick’s *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley*, a detailed biographical and anecdotal history of

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Elvis’s early life and musical career up to September 1958, has provided an essential source for many scholarly studies on Elvis since the mid-1990s. Among more recent biographical publications covering the entire span of his career are Glen Jeansonne, David Luhrssen, and Dan Sokolovic’s *Elvis Presley, Reluctant Rebel: His Life and Our Times*, and Jerry Hopkins’s *Elvis Presley: The Biography*, as well as Ernst Jorgensen’s *Elvis Presley: A Life in Music*, in which the author by chronicling Elvis’s recording career on a session-by-session basis provided a complete discography.

Biographical information on the musicians and personnel associated with Elvis’s Sun years is more scatter-shot. Ken Burke and Dan Griffin in *The Blue Moon Boys: The Story of Elvis Presley’s Band*, constructed a history of Elvis’s first ensemble with a relatively extensive biography of the group’s bassist Bill Black, who has received only passing attention in similar writings. Elvis’s guitarist, Scotty Moore, collaborated with James Dickerson on two autobiographies, *Scotty and Elvis: Aboard the Mystery Train* and *That’s Alright, Elvis: The Untold Story of Elvis’s First Guitarist and Manager, Scotty Moore*. Drummer D. J. Fontana has also published an autobiography, *The Beat behind the King* in which he documented his association with Elvis between the years 1954 and


1968.112 There has been surprisingly scant biographical writing on Sun records mastermind and producer, Sam Phillips. Guralnick and director Morgan Neville compiled one of the most comprehensive accounts of his life in the documentary film, *Sam Phillips: The Man Who Invented Rock ‘n’ Roll.*113 Louis Cantor penned a biography of Memphis deejay Dewey Phillips, titled *Dewey and Elvis: The Life and Times of a Rock ‘n’ Roll Deejay,* and highlighted his role in plugging Elvis’s Sun records in the South,114 while James Dickerson in *Colonel Tom Parker: The Curious Life of Elvis Presley’s Eccentric Manager* has given an authoritative chronicle of the life and career of Elvis’s manager and promoter.115

Memphis is a locale of essential importance in the history of rock ‘n’ roll in general and for Elvis’s career in particular. James Dickerson in the book *Goin’ Back to Memphis* compiled a detailed account of the evolution of the Memphis music scene during the twentieth century to show the contributions of Memphis recording studios such as Sun and Stax and radio stations such as the all-black-staffed WDIA in fostering racial and stylistic integration.116 In *Good Rockin’ Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock ‘n’ Roll,* Colin Escott and Martin Hawkins delivered a history of Sun Studio by providing accounts of recording sessions with information on recorded material, personnel,


as well as studio equipment and configuration. 117 Tracey E. W. Laird in *Louisiana Hayride: Radio and Roots Music along the Red River* addressed the history of the country music radio show, the *Louisiana Hayride* (1948-1960), broadcast from Shreveport, Louisiana, and focused on its importance in bringing Southern musicians such as Webb Pierce, Hank Williams, Johnny Horton, and Elvis to wider national popularity. 118

In summary, the present survey of literature covers studies in mass media theory and in the phonograph record and broadcast radio industries as well as musicological, historical, and aesthetic investigations of American popular music. It demonstrates that, as researchers have directed more and more attention to mass culture, the need to examine the processes and practices of the production of cultural forms has become increasingly clear to scholars from a wide array of disciplines and theoretical orientations. Studies employing the production of culture perspective have revealed how the implications of technological, legal, economic, and practical developments shape the nature of cultural goods. Several scholars have applied this perspective to examinations of rock ‘n’ roll music and related subjects. These studies have shown the usefulness of this approach in evaluating the relationship between mass media and change—be it cultural, social, or aesthetic—while also suggesting that extending this line of inquiry further will continue to yield valuable insight for researchers in the field of popular music.

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Methodology

The Production of Culture Perspective

The production of culture perspective is an analytical tool developed in the field of cultural sociology to illustrate concrete ways in which cultural symbols are shaped by the social contexts in which they are produced, disseminated, and consumed. Due to the wide range of factors falling under the purview of “production”—as the term applies to the production of culture perspective—research in this vein requires engaging with sources from an array of fields, notably sociology, media studies, organizational theory, economics, and music criticism. The production of culture perspective does not represent a single formal theory or analytical method, nor does it necessarily champion one specific theoretical orientation or mode of study over another.  It instead provides a broad approach capable of incorporating sources and methods from differing areas of study in order to understand how aspects of media and society overlap to frame culture. The “untheoretical” character of the perspective has, in fact, been incorporated intentionally by sociologists such as Richard Peterson, Janet Wolff, Howard Becker, and Vera Zolberg with the aim of developing a more empirically-oriented analytical alternative to “overly-theoretical” approaches like those of Adorno-inspired models, which have

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122 See Howard Becker, Art Worlds (Berkley: University of California Press, 1982).
tended to treat texts as autonomous works outside of the social context. Despite its relatively loose methodological and theoretical configuration, the outlook of the production of culture entails several essential epistemological assertions concerning the relationship between text and context—i.e., between cultural products and the social, economic, legal, and technological circumstances that constrain and facilitate processes of production. The production of culture perspective rests on the assertion that in corporate capitalist societies cultural symbols in recorded cultures (e.g., film, print media, music, television, drama, and the visual arts) can only be understood within the systems in which they are produced and consumed. By focusing on the impact of con-text in this manner the perspective discounts the notion of the individual creative genius for explaining the emergence of aesthetic innovation at certain historical points. It in stead takes the position that the number of creative individuals or products (i.e., supply) within a given culture exceeds demand, and what makes it to the public is shaped by limitations and opportunities within the system of production. The perspective does not, however, suggest that direct causal relationships or predictions can be drawn through examination of the production system alone. To the contrary, the perspective acknowledges the fluid relationship between creative activities and the socioeconomic structures in which they are carried out and seeks to demonstrate the dynamic ways individuals and firms act to


create new systems of production in response to “real-life” social, economic, and technological conditions. In this respect the perspective also accounts for the agency of social actors thereby avoiding deterministic explanations for cultural change.

Focus and Objective

In this study I employ the production of culture perspective to examine the impact of the commercial record and radio industries on Elvis’s formative career on the Sun label and the broader industry adoption of black popular music styles during the rise of rock ‘n’ roll. The primary area of focus is a production nexus made up of independent record labels and radio stations operating in the South from the late 1940s through the 1950s. As industry shifts must be viewed in relation to past conditions and practices, however, my analysis takes a broader temporal focus when doing so illuminates such shifts or highlights relevant historical continuities. Likewise, factors external to this primary production nexus are considered when required for broader historical or institutional context. The shift in the radio market from a national to local and regional market, for example, more than any other single factor, was related to market fragmentation that occurred as national networks transferred their most popular programming from radio to the new medium of television. This market shift was a key component of increasing competitive success of independent radio stations, and in turn, for small independent rhythm and blues labels such as Sun. Therefore, although television did not play a direct role in Elvis’s career trajectory in the Sun years, the influence of it and other factors are considered as they pertain to shifts within the commercial record and radio industries. One other factor outside of the primary production nexus—urbanization and electrification of rural string-band music—was directly related to socioeconomic, cul-
tural, and aesthetic shifts directly related to rock ‘n’ roll and Elvis’s early career. Therefore the impact of this factor is also considered to give broader historical context.

Finally, live performances in public venues and “live” in-studio radio programs such as *Louisiana Hayride* are only a peripheral concern in this study. This is not to downplay the importance of live concerts or radio appearances on Elvis’s emergence as a cultural and musical figure in the public eye and ear. Nor is it to denigrate his skill as a live entertainer. The thorough examination of either of these formats would, in fact, exceed the space limitations of this study. I do, however, argue that it is of essential importance to consider the fact that, unlike the vast majority of professional and semi-professional performers in the field of popular music up to that point, Elvis created and honed his initial public musical identity not through playing for live audiences (whether live in a physical venue or “live” on-air) but through experimentation in the recording studio. It is my aim to show how conditions in the record and radio industries compelled the adoption of this alternative career model for Elvis at Sun and to identify innovative practices associated with this mode of production, which distinguished Elvis and his contemporaries from the previous generation of mainstream popular music stars.

**Methods and Materials**

In the current study I draw on Richard A. Peterson’s six-facet production of culture model as exemplified in his 1990 essay, “Why 55? Explaining the Advent of Rock Music.” In this essay Peterson delineated six overlapping facets governing creativity within a production nexus: technology, law, industry structure, organization structure, market, and occupational career. This model, modified in a few organizational re-

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pects, serves both as my analytical lens and as the primary organizing feature for the current study. Whereas Peterson in “Why 55?” tackled all of the six facets separately, for the purposes of this research I analyze issues related to market and law and regulation simultaneously in Chapter Three. Similarly, I consider issues of industry structure, organization structure, and occupational careers all in Chapter Four. Thus, this study is divided into the following chapters according to subject area: Chapter One: Introduction; Chapter Two: Technological Reorientation and the Pop Culture Moment; Chapter Three: The Rise of the Independents: Law and Regulation and Resource Interdependence; Chapter Four: Industry and Organization Structure: Effects of Industry Concentration on Musical Innovation and Diversity; and, Chapter Five: Conclusion.

Within any one chapter focus may shift from the macro / institutional-level to the localized level of individual actions, depending on the specific topic under consideration. In the context of the current study, however, the effects of changes in technology and in law and regulation often demonstrate the broadest impact, followed by those in industry and organizational structure and in market, while the effects of occupational careers emphasize activities of individuals. Furthermore, within each chapter, focus tends to begin with broad, institution-wide issues before narrowing down to the analysis of specific practices.

As a shifting degree of focus is required when moving among areas of the six-facet model, so too are differing analytical perspectives as the nature of the subject matter dictates. After giving an overview of the primary research problems and analytical perspectives in Chapter One, in Chapter Two I examine changes in the technological foundation of the popular music industry leading to the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s.
The chapter is divided into five sections. In the first I establish my basic framework for assessing technological change. This is based on Richard Middleton’s “topographical” model, which distinguishes between deep-level, “situational” changes occurring in cultural and social formations, and “conjectural” changes, which take place on the surface of these structures.128 In the second section I assess changes in the dominant aesthetic of popular music related to the rise of the electric guitar. After briefly summarizing the early history of the record and radio industries in the third section, in the fourth section I apply Marshall McLuhan’s media tetrad to assess the impact of the entry of records and radio into the Southern oral tradition. Lastly, I highlight the role of technology in new practices in rock ‘n’ roll in general, and in Elvis’s Sun sessions specifically.

In Chapter Three I highlight changes in four areas of law and regulation: copyright law, patent law, unionization, and Federal Communication Commission (FCC) regulation. I consider the role of these legal and regulatory factors on shifting power dynamics in the popular music industry leading to the change from a national to a local and regional market structure in the broadcast radio and commercial phonograph industries after World War II. For my primary analytical framework I employ a resource inter-dependence model adapted from Jonathan Tankel and Wenmouth Williams’s study “From AM to FM: Radio Economics and the Shift from AM to FM, 1965-1978,”129 After outlining my analytical approach in the first two sections, in the third I highlight copyright struggles between music publishers and radio broadcasters leading to the


formation of Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI) and consider related changes in production practices. Next, I examine the role of the musicians’ unions fight for performance rights in the growing reliance on phonographic music for small independent broadcasters. In the subsequent passage I consider patent law disputes surrounding 33 1/3 LP and 45 rpm single record formats and assess the role of the 45 rpm single record in increased market access for small independent recording companies. The impact of FCC deregulation in the fragmentation of the post-television radio market and expansion of independent radio are then reviewed. In the last section I analyze the role of independent radio in shifting patterns of music consumption, specifically the growing popularity of rhythm and blues with young white audiences in the Jim Crow South.

In Chapter Four I investigate the impact of shifts in industry and organization structure on innovation and diversity in the postwar mainstream popular music market. I first outline basic structural elements of the popular music industry and demonstrate the role of vertical and horizontal integration in major-label control of the mainstream market during the 1930s and early 1940s. I illustrate how market turbulence in the postwar record market destabilized major firms’ mechanisms of market control allowing a crop of small, innovative independent companies from the specialty recording field to become competitive in the mainstream market. Next I consider arguments from Peterson and Berger’s study, “Cycles in Symbol Production,” in which they attribute innovation primarily to small firms during periods of low concentration.\textsuperscript{130} I then examine competing accounts that argue that the effects of industry concentration are mitigated by the organization structure of firms and the reigning logic of production. Along this line, I trace a

broad industry shift in the mainstream record market from a “closed system” of production during the previous era to an “open system” during and after the national emergence of rock ‘n’ roll. Furthermore, I highlight the role of decentralized production on continued diversity during high market concentration in subsequent decades. Lastly, I briefly consider the role of decentralization within firms and companies in the shifting balance of occupational career types in the popular music industry from a preponderance of craftsmen and functionaries in the prewar era to increasing prominence of showmen and entrepreneurs beginning in the mid-1950s.

In the final chapter I summarize my main arguments from the previous chapters and consider the implications of my findings. No original experimental or primary empirical research was conducted for this study.
Chapter Two

TECHNOLOGICAL REORIENTATION AND

THE POP CULTURE MOMENT

The emergence of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s was part and parcel of a wholesale technological transformation—a literal retooling—of the music industry. This occurred as electronic modes of production and distribution supplanted mechanical ones as the primary forms of musical experience in the United States. Richard Middleton in his essay “Articulating Musical Meaning / Re-Constructing Musical History / Locating the ‘Popular’” has referred to this shift as the “pop culture moment.”¹ During the pop culture moment radical industry reorientation tied popular music to the realm of electronic mass media while the enormous international popularity of rock ‘n’ roll simultaneously re-defined the role of popular music in the broader scope of popular culture. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how changes in the technology of production for popular music translated into new practices, new attitudes toward music, and new spatial, temporal, and social relationships between producers and consumers, all of which were essential in the development of the pop culture moment but, of greater relevance to this study, the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll and the phenomenon of Elvis.

Assessing the impact of technological change on cultural or aesthetic shifts presents complex analytical challenges. Foremost among them is the fact that the relationship between cultural formations and the technological / economic base is constantly in flux. Therefore, according to Stuart Hall, an effective analytical approach “treats the

domain of cultural forms and activities as a constantly changing field . . . [and] looks at the relations which constantly structure this field into dominant and subordinate formations.”

Along these lines Middleton argued that cultural practices develop with “relative autonomy” from the base. While economic / technological / social factors may play a primary determinative role in cultural changes, cultural elements may exhibit “their own modes of existence, their own inertia, their own time-scales.” At the same time a “necessary reciprocity” between changes in the economic / technological base and changes in cultural practice is evident. The effects of technology are not predetermined, however, but are the product of people responding to the realities of the historical conditions of their specific time and place, drawing on available materials, and acting according to their own personal interests and individual talents. In the words of Middleton, “The relationship between actual culture, consciousness, ideas, experience on the one hand, and the economic base, on the other, is always problematical, incomplete and the object of ideological struggle.”

To account for the complex nature of change in dynamically structured social / cultural fields, Middleton employed a “topographical” approach derived from Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural change. This framework distinguishes between two levels

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2 Stuart Hall quoted in ibid., 6.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.


of structure on which changes within a cultural field may be witnessed. The first is the “situational” level; and the second, the “conjectural” level. Changes taking place on the situational level are deep-rooted and relatively permanent. Those on the conjectural level, on the other hand, are less significant and relatively short-lived; they occur more rapidly and are felt more immediately arising out of struggles to reconcile contradictory forces on the situational level. The advent of magnetic tape or the electric microphone, for example, stand as instances of situational change in music production and consumption, as transformations associated with these technologies shaped production practices throughout the remainder of the century. The jukebox or the 45-rpm single record, conversely, represent examples of conjectural change. The impact of these technologies, while considerable, was isolated to a relatively short historical period.

Specifically, Middleton highlighted two instances of situational change in the production technology of popular music leading to the pop culture moment: the advent of the electric guitar and the introduction of electronic forms of music production and distribution. These changes and attendant shifts in relations of production created the potential for new modes of music making by putting resources at the disposal of young, working-class amateurs and fissuring the homogeneous market conception of the previous mechanical “mass-culture” model of Tin Pan Alley. In the following sections I explore the role of technology in these situational changes. First I assess changes in the dominant aesthetic of popular music related to the rise of the electric guitar. Next, I consider the increasing amateurism in postwar popular music. After briefly summarizing the early

history of the record and radio industries, I then examine the impact of the entry of records and radio into the Southern oral tradition. Lastly, I examine technological aspects of practices instituted in Elvis’s Sun recording sessions.

**Introduction of the Electric Guitar**

Electrification of the guitar came about with the invention of the electromagnetic pickup by George Beauchamp and Adolph Rickenbacker in the 1930s. Electric pickup technology dramatically increased the volume capacity of the guitar by utilizing magnetic amplification, which was significantly more resistant to audio feedback than microphones designed on acoustic principles. Pickups were first used on lap steels, but by the 1940s companies like Fender, Gibson, Rickenbacker, and Gretsch were applying electro-magnetic pickup technology to production-model six-string guitars as well. Mass production kept instruments relatively affordable while the increased volume capacity offered by electrification opened up opportunities for guitarists to expand their creative and musical role.

The manner in which the electric guitar came to the fore in popular music in the 1940s was inextricably tied to broader trends of urbanization resulting from situational technological change acutely affecting the rural South, namely the introduction of modern mechanized farming practices. Streamlining labor intensive tasks, such as planting, cultivating, chopping, and picking through internal-combustion powered farming equipment as well as the impact of chemical herbicides dramatically decreased the demand for unskilled agricultural labor. The shifting labor force collapsed the sharecropping system that had been the economic cornerstone in major row-crop states like Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas.
The obsolescence of the sharecropping system moved concentrated demand for unskilled labor to manufacturing centers of the urban South, Midwest, and elsewhere. Over the course of the 1920s, 700,000 blacks left the South; during the 1940s, another 1,200,000.\textsuperscript{10} Whites were part of this mass migration as well. In total more than 28,000,000 Southerners, black and white, primarily from the lower strata of the socio-economic spectrum, moved north or west during the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{11}

Memphis, with its growing manufacturing and shipping industries and its location at the northern tip of the Mississippi Delta, was a natural destination for thousands of rural migrants during the first half of the century. Some of the most prominent figures in the history and imminent prehistory of rock ‘n’ roll—B. B. King and Howlin’ Wolf (Mississippi), Johnny Cash and Billy Lee Riley (Arkansas), Carl Perkins (Tennessee), and Sam Phillips (Alabama)—were among the mass of displaced rural Southerners who landed in Memphis. All of them had picked cotton, and by all accounts all were more than happy to leave the grueling work of the cotton fields to pursue the new opportunities that the city offered. Elvis, not having grown up in an agricultural family, was an exception to this rule, but the Presleys’s move from Tupelo to Memphis in 1948 was more of a change than it may appear to one who did not live in a small Southern town during this period.\textsuperscript{12}

Besides Memphis, urban areas throughout the country—from Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago, and Detroit to Los Angeles—absorbed the dispersion of white and black


\textsuperscript{12} James M. Curtis, “Toward a Sociotechnological Interpretation of Popular Music in the Electronic Age,” Technology and Culture XXV/1 (January 1984), 95.
working-class Southerners displaced by the fragmentation of the rural Southern economy. The mass rural-to-urban migration of the Southern poor brought with it a mass transplantation of rural string-band music: country blues, jugband music, and hillbilly string music to newly urbanized performance venues. Essential stylistic developments prefiguring rock ‘n’ roll resulted from the urbanization of rural string music at this time.

Comparing the recorded output of Grand Ole Opry star Roy Acuff with that of Ernest Tubb from the same period gives a picture of how the large urban and suburban dancehalls shaped the aesthetic of hillbilly string music. During the 1940s Acuff’s hillbilly string band, with sideman Pete Kirby (stage name “Bashful Brother Oswald”) on dobro, became the flagship act of the Grand Ole Opry radio show. In the simulated “traditional” setting of the Opry, purist sentiments initially thwarted the adoption of electrification. Tubb scandalized Opry management in 1943 when he appeared on the program playing an electric guitar. The sound of Tubb’s electrified string ensemble was representative of the hard-edged honky tonk aesthetic emerging in the dance halls around oil and cow towns such as Fort Worth, San Antonio, and Tulsa, where the raucous conditions of these large urban and suburban venues made electrical amplification a necessity for guitarists.

The Opry maintained a soft ban prohibiting electrically amplified instruments up through the 1940s. Outside of this sphere, however, innovative guitarists established the viability of the electric guitar as a primary lead instrument in country music and developed sophisticated, distinctly “electric” guitar styles by embracing unique aspects of amplification. By the mid-1940s Bob Wills with his countrified, electrified variation of the big-band swing ensemble, effectively filled the role of an entire horn line with electric
guitar, amplified steels, and twin fiddles. Electric guitar also became a sonic signature of the stripped-down electric honky tonk aesthetic popularized by Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Merle Travis, who popularized an electrified adaptation of a distinctive regional Kentucky thumb-picking technique, became one of the preeminent figures in country guitar. Arguably the most influential country guitarist of this period, Travis also played a central role in developing one of the first solid-body electric guitar designs.

Urbanization influenced parallel changes in rural black music. Comparing the field recordings of Muddy Waters made by Alan Lomax on the Stovall Plantation in Mississippi with Waters’s first commercial recordings made for Chess after moving to Chicago in the mid-1940s gives a Cliff-note picture of the shaping influence of urbanization/electrification on rural blues. Here, once again, volume was key. Jazz and blues guitarists in urban juke joints and nightclubs, facing performance conditions similar to those of honky tonk and Western swing guitarists, also embraced electrification. As pickup technology progressed and higher wattage amplifiers became available, clean, ringing, bell-like tones, were made possible at high volumes. Following the lead of Les Paul and his peers, guitar tones in mainstream pop became “cleaner” during the 1940s. But in the blues, guitarists, notably Waters, T-Bone Walker, Howlin’ Wolf’s guitarist Willie Johnson, and John Lee Hooker, used volume as an effect, routinely overdriving amplifiers with excessive volume to attain higher string sensitivity and response, a “smooth” compressed dynamic range, longer sustained pitches, and an increased complexity of harmonic content. Through more drastic experiments with volume and

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intentional “misuses” of amplification equipment such as tearing speaker cones, these
guitarists produced some of the most radical timbral experiments in the early history of
the instrument. Incorporating distortion, noise, and controlled feedback, these guitarists
created a new sonic vocabulary thanks to electrical effects.

Evolving from this was the musically simplistic, yet sonically potent, “three-
chord” electric guitar style that came to the fore in rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s. Electrifi-
cation made it possible for a small string band to achieve the volume that up to that point
was only possible with a big band. This, along with a number of factors—economic
constraints, loss of personnel during the war years, and the American Federation of
Musicians recording ban of 1942—effectively signaled the end of the big-band heyday.
Rapidly supplanting the big bands in the postwar years were small combos, which in-
creasingly featured electric guitar as the primary instrument.

Elvis’s Sun records provide a definitive example of this changing internal dynam-
ic and the new sense of the singer as an individual that evolved in the small combo for-
mat at this time. James M. Curtis differentiated this dynamic from the previous aesthetic
dominating mainstream pop at the time:

We can understand what this means by contrasting Elvis’s rise to stardom
with the careers of the major singers of the late 1940s and early 1950s. . . .
A number of these singers had established themselves as vocalists with big
bands: Peggy Lee with Benny Goodman; Frank Sinatra with Harry James
and Tommy Dorsey; Doris Day with Les Brown; Perry Como with Ted
Weems. The smooth sound of those big horn sections never let the singer
dominate the overall effect, as Elvis did.14

Besides shifting the internal dynamics of the ensemble, the introduction of the electric guitar further distanced the typical small-combo from the big-band sound by fostering a distinctively amateur aesthetic. The electric guitar being easier to master than the acoustic guitar, the instrument attracted an increasing number of young performers who brought into question professionalized standards of technical skill.\(^{15}\)

**Rock ‘n’ Roll and the Amateur Aesthetic**

The archetypal rockabilly guitar playing of Scotty Moore on Elvis’s Sun records is illustrative of the emerging postwar amateur aesthetic. Moore’s style represented a primitive take on the “Travis picking” technique of the Merle Travis / Chet Atkins school of electric country guitar. His introduction to the guitar came from his father and older brothers who had showed him the rudiments of the instrument as a boy. He did not himself begin playing with any seriousness until joining the Navy in 1947, when he played mainly to relieve boredom during long hours of downtime while deployed as a crewman overseas. “That’s when I really started playing,” Moore recalled in an interview with Martin Taylor.\(^{16}\)

After being discharged in 1952, he returned to Memphis and formed his own honky tonk / western swing outfit called The Starlite Wranglers. The group featured the core of Elvis’s future backing band—Moore on electric guitar and Bill Black on standup bass—as well as hillbilly vocalist Doug Poindexter, fiddler Tommy Seals, steel guitarist Millard Yow, and rhythm guitarist Clyde Rush. The Wranglers were far from being


\(^{16}\) *ArtistWorks, “Martin Taylor Interviews Elvis Guitarist Scotty Moore” [Online Video Clip], (www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQgFP-AwSBk).*
virtuosos. “Bill was one of the worst bass players in the world, technically,” recalled Sam Phillips, “but, man, could he slap that thing!” 17 Black was actually one of the more experienced performers of the group. Despite their amateurishness, the Wranglers managed to cut a side for Sun featuring two rough-hewn country numbers, “My Kind of Carrying On” with B side, “She Cares No More for Me.” Even after releasing the record, the group’s live performing activity remained limited to playing occasional dances. Moore continued to hone his instrumental technique autodidactically, however, mainly through imitating recordings. As he recounted his time with the Wranglers, “I mostly just stayed at home playing (with) records and stuff like that . . . trying to figure it out.” 18

Elvis’s pre-Sun experience as a public performer was even less extensive than that of Moore. His first bona fide attempt at joining a group was an audition for a professional band in Memphis led by singer Eddie Bond. The tryout famously ended with Bond condescendingly advising Elvis to stick to driving a truck “because you’re never going to make it as a singer.” 19 Elvis’s next tryout came in the summer of 1954 when Moore and Black set up an audition for the nineteen-year-old singer at Phillips’s behest. After running through a few numbers in Moore’s living room, neither Moore nor Black were overly impressed with what they heard or saw from the young singer. “Well, he didn’t impress me too damn much,” were Black’s words to Moore when asking him what he thought of Elvis’s potential. 20 The only aspect of Elvis’s audition that left an impression on Moore was his encyclopedic knowledge of music, which spanned the stylistic

17 William McKeen, Rock and Roll is Here to Stay: An Anthology (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 129.
18 ArtistWorks, “Martin Taylor Interviews.”
19 Peter Guralnick, Last Train, 83.
20 Bill Black, quoted in ibid., 93.
range of the popular catalogue from country and pop to rhythm and blues ballads. In Moore’s recollection of his first encounter with Elvis, it was as if he knew “every damn song in the world.”

The breadth of Elvis’s repertoire reflected the diversity of music in his record collection and that of the Memphis airwaves at the time. Radio programming in the Mid-South in the years after World War II ran the gamut from broadcasts of pop and big-band dance music on WREC Memphis to hillbilly shows like Smilin’ Eddie Hill’s Noon-time Roundup show on WMPS Memphis and the Grand Ole Opry on WSM Nashville to the rhythm and blues programming of stations like WKEM West Memphis, WLOK Memphis, WHBQ Memphis, and WDIA Memphis, the last being the first all-black formatted station in the United States. By drawing on the technologically enhanced formats of phonograph records and radio it was possible even for a musical illiterate like Elvis to learn in a few months what may have taken years for one learning by traditional written or oral means.

As Peter Doyle argued, what distinguished Elvis, Moore, and other musicians of the rock ‘n’ roll generation from their predecessors in honky tonk, Western swing, and rhythm and blues was, in fact, that they did not have “track form” from playing in bars, honky tonks, or dancehalls. The picture of Moore, Elvis, and Black—largely self-

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22 Scotty Moore, quoted in James Dickerson, That’s Alright, Elvis (New York: Schirmer, 1997), 56.

23 Larry Birnbaum, Before Elvis, 2-4.


25 Peter Doyle, Echo and Reverb, 183.
taught amateurs playing primarily for self-amusement and building their repertoire and technique by listening to and imitating recordings and radio—illustrates the emergence of a new technologically-oriented tradition coalescing around electronically-disseminated music. As electrification reconfigured the role of the guitar in popular music ensembles, electrification of musical dissemination also radically reconfigured relationships of production and consumption and established new conventions, attitudes, and practices, which laid the groundwork for rock ‘n’ roll.

**Recordings and Radio**

The second instance of situational change that Middleton recognized is the replacement of sheet music by electronic modes of production and distribution as the primary media for popular song. With its financial infrastructure based on sheet music publishing, the mainstream tradition of the Tin Pan Alley popular song had been built around mechanical forms of production, namely those of the printing press and the home piano. In the early twentieth century, however, the advent of new forms of musical dissemination effectively split the commercial musical industry along technological lines. The first of these splits came with the entrance of commercial radio. Ennis described the technological division between the broadcasting and publishing industries:

The music publishers, mainly in New York City, were a small-shop, labor intensive, undercapitalized industry whose most complex technology was a metronome. Radio broadcasting, on the other hand, was technologically advanced, on the leading edge where physics and engineering met high-flying corporate finance. The meeting of publisher and broadcaster would change the way music was to be brought into the home.26

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The Great Depression had killed vaudeville, hurt the publishing industry, and nearly starved the fledgling phonograph industry. Broadcast radio, however, by offering a free alternative to these other forms of musical entertainment, flourished. By the 1930s nearly every home in America had a radio.\textsuperscript{27}

The growth of radio initially had a decentralizing effect on the popular music industry. During the 1920s new stations sprouted up with no outside funding except for local sponsors. Southern radio, in particular, became one of the fastest growing sectors of the American economy.\textsuperscript{28} For the most part, unspoken racist policies kept blacks off the radio before World War II.\textsuperscript{29} Besides some notable exceptions, such as Duke Ellington’s nationally syndicated Cotton Club broadcasts, national network programming was dominated by white pop. Apart from mainstream programming, white country and gospel became the main radio fare in the South and across an area stretching westward through Texas to mid-California’s agricultural belt.\textsuperscript{30}

The other technological split within the popular music industry came from the entrance of commercial recording. Whereas by mid-century the recording and broadcasting industries were vitally linked, for most of the first half of the century they were in fierce competition. And while radio was for the most part closed to black musicians, the recording industry was not. Between 1920 and 1940 more than one-hundred companies recorded over 18,000 sides with approximately 2,000 black artists—about ten percent of...


\textsuperscript{28} Phillip H. Ennis, \textit{Seventh Stream}, 57.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ibid.}, 57-58.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}
the total output of the record industry from this period.\textsuperscript{31} This recording activity was initiated primarily by “specialty” record companies. Comprised of a mix of independents, subsidiary labels, and specialty divisions of major labels such as Okeh, Vocalion, and Bluebird, this industry tier was geared toward markets of specific ethnic, religious, or national backgrounds and recorded diverse genera ranging from polka, Latin, and country to blues and jazz.

Unlike the external segregation of the radio industry, the specialty industry developed a system of internal segregation. This was done by dividing their record catalogues and sales charts on the basis of the race of performers with racial signifiers like “Hillbilly” and “Hillbilly and Foreign Records” to denote whites and terms like “Race,” “What’s Hot in Harlem,” and “Sepia Hits” to denote black performers.\textsuperscript{32} Over the course of the 1930s and early 1940s the “race” and “hillbilly” markets, as they became widely known, further diverged from the mainstream popular music market in terms of musical aesthetic and intended audiences.

After a period of severe decline in the 1930s, the specialty industry rebounded in the mid-1940s. Demand for records increased, and a new wave of small upstart companies entered the recording market. Among them was Sam Phillips’s Memphis Recording Service, opened in 1950. By this time \textit{Billboard} had officially changed the name of the “Race” charts to “Rhythm and Blues” and the “Hillbilly” charts to “Country and Western,” but the internal segregation of charts and catalogues remained in place. Originally Phillips specialized in recording black rhythm and blues acts. These included the early recordings of B. B. King and Joe Hill Louis, which he leased to RPM / Modern in

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 76.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 25.
Los Angeles, and the records of Jackie Brenston and Howlin’ Wolf, released by Chess in Chicago. Riding on the success of these records, Phillips started his own label, Sun, in early 1952. Because its most lucrative records in the pre-Elvis years were those of black artists like The Prisonaires, Rufus Thomas, and Junior Parker, Sun was initially known primarily as a rhythm and blues label, although as was typical for specialty companies, Sun also released white hillbilly / country and western records. Among these white performers were Hardrock Gunter, Harmonica Frank, Earl Peterson, and Doug Poindexter and the Starlite Wranglers. At this time, however, Sun’s catalogue for the most part reflected the division between black and white music customary in the broader industry.

Illustration 2.1 provides visual documentation of Sun 201 by Hardrock Gunter and Sun 202 by Doug Poindexter and The Starlite Wranglers. Both records are stamped with “Hillbilly” in red to signify white performers and to differentiate them from Sun’s usual Rhythm and Blues output. Released in May 1954, these records preceded Elvis’s first record, Sun 209, by about two months.33

Illustration 2.1. Sun 201 by Hardrock Gunter and Sun 202 by Doug Poindexter and The Starlite Wranglers.

[Images omitted due to copyright restrictions. To view see, John Boija, “Sun Record Company: A Discography, Part II / 200-224,” (www.boija.com/skivor/sun_singles_0.htm).]

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Electronic Media and Tradition

To explore more fully the racial divide that formed between the race and hillbilly industries it is useful to view practices that developed within these fields in relation to pre-existing musical traditions. Whereas the electric guitar clearly fit the typical need-invention-application pattern of invention (attempts at designing louder guitars stretched back well into the nineteenth century), both radio and the phonograph evolved in a fundamentally different manner in that the forms of both media preceded their content. Broadcast radio developed in the margins of the preexisting technology of telegraphy, and the phonograph was invented with no clear purpose as to the function it would fill. 34 It was nearly a decade after its invention in 1877, when failing to market the device successfully as an office dictation machine, that the phonograph’s inventor Thomas Edison first offered a commercially available musical version of the machine. His invention was far more popular in its musical incarnation, and by the turn of the century phonograph players were a familiar form of entertainment in the modern home. 35

The beginning of the specialty recording industry in the 1920s was marked by a brief but intense burst of activity spurred by the growing demand for recorded music in the home. The leader in the industry’s formative period was New York talent scout / producer / engineer Ralph Peer. 36 Working first for Columbia, then Okeh, and eventually for Victor, Peer pioneered a method of musical production that Peterson in his study on

34 Raymond Williams, Television: Technology and Cultural Form (London: Taylor & Francis, e-Library, 2004), 18; posted online.


36 For more on Peer, see Barry Mazor, Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2015).
country music termed “strip-mining.” The objective of Peer’s method was to record anything and everything and then to sift out examples with commercial potential. The primary source of music targeted was that of the Southern oral folk tradition. This resource proved ideal for two reasons. First was its popularity among Southern and rural niche markets whose tastes were not met by major label programming. Second was that the southern oral tradition in the 1920s still held a massive pool of uncopyrighted music. Therefore the music could be recorded and sold without having to pay royalties to writers or publishers.

Advances in microphone technology were also key to the success of the strip-mining approach. Most notable was the advent of the electrical carbon microphone in the late 1920s. Electrical recording technology not only greatly improved the sound quality of recorded music over that recorded acoustically but also made recording equipment readily portable. With the carbon microphone, in the words of Charles Wolfe, “Now you could, in fact, put everything you needed to make a record in the back of a 1927 touring car.”

Taking advantage of this portability, specialty scouts developed a system of remote recording, which Phillip Ennis described as “quick field trips spent collecting songs and performances paid for in small bills.” Although highly profitable for a time, the viability of such methods was rather short-lived. What was originally thought to have been an inexhaustible pool of royalty-free music was depleted within a few years, and

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Peer and others in the specialty industry moved on to more sustainable modes of musical production.

The initial burst of recording activity generated deep, irreversible changes, however, by effectively bringing the ethnically grounded Southern oral folk tradition into a new technologically grounded format.\(^{40}\) Robert Cantwell in his study of bluegrass described the effects of early recording activity on the Southern oral (aural) tradition: \(^{41}\)

But what happens when recording enters an already existing aural tradition? The two may at first live side by side, the one to sing, the other to scribble down, each in its separate and independent sphere. But because the new technology is without a content of its own it will feed upon the aural tradition, ultimately to exhaust and perhaps to consummate it in some encyclopedic display in which the total order of the tradition manifests itself as in aural performance it never could; a new art based on the technology itself, as the novel is based on the printed book, succeeds the aural tradition. But for a brief historical moment, the moment of transition, as the aural tradition begins to spill into the vast, empty reservoir of the new technology but before the artist has discovered its specific properties, he will call upon the old methods, the methods of aural composition, to create in the new medium.\(^{42}\)

The technological transformation outlined by Cantwell imparted fundamental shifts in production and consumption practices in Southern folk and popular traditions and produced substantial changes in the dominant aesthetic in these fields. Further insight into the nature of these shifts and their impact on future developments essential in the formation of rock ‘n’ roll can be gained by applying Marshall McLuhan’s “Laws of the Media”

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 179.

\(^{41}\) Cantwell preferred the term “aural” as opposed to “oral” as the former term may be applied both to non-written musical practices in the oral tradition (where musical exchange took place primarily by face-to-face interaction) and in the recorded / broadcast music era where musical experience was increasingly mediated by electronic dissemination. See Robert Cantwell, Bluegrass Breakdown, 145.

\(^{42}\) Robert Cantwell, Bluegrass Breakdown, 184.
tetrad, which poses the following questions of a new media form: 1. What does it enhance? 2. What does it obsolesce? 3. What does it retrieve that has been obsolesced earlier? 4. What does it reverse into when pushed to the limits of its potential? 43

Phonograph recording and broadcast radio enhanced three aspects of musical experience from the aural/oral tradition. First they enhanced aurality by privileging sound to the exclusion of all other senses, thus encouraging the listener to identify music first and foremost as sound. 44 Second, records and radio enhanced accessibility of music by bypassing geographic and social barriers present in live performance contexts and by bringing a wide range of music into the domestic sphere relatively inexpensively. Furthermore, by instituting an alternative system of production derived from the oral tradition instead of the written mode of production of Tin Pan Alley, electrical recording and dissemination also enhanced access to the popular music industry for musical illiterate musicians. Finally, these formats dramatically increased the speed of transmission of musical information by harnessing mass communication technology.

What records and radio obsolesced was the oral tradition on which these formats initially fed. This was due to two main factors. First, transplanting music from the socially grounded oral tradition into recorded and broadcast forms stripped the music of the dramatic and ritualistic function that it served in public performance. 45 Second, the speed of transmission and consumption facilitated by mass-communication technologies surpassed what the creative capacity of the oral tradition could sustain.

44 Robert Cantwell, Bluegrass Breakdown, 186.
As Curtis has pointed out, however, obsolete media usually coexist alongside new ones for long periods of time and may, in fact, show considerable power and popularity. Technological change is relative; new media do not necessarily annihilate the media forms they supplant. What is more important to consider is how the dominant media of a period creates an “implied listener.” Borrowing the term from literary critic Wolfgang Iser, Curtis distinguished his use of this concept as it applies specifically to popular music writing: “The concept of an “audience” for literature is a fiction, of course, but not that of one for music. Popular music always has an audience; that is why it is popular.”

What further distinguishes the implied listener in music from that for printed media is that music creates an auditory space, thus situating the listener in a specific listening environment as well.

Changes in the situation of audiences and musicians within the radio-listening environment played a major role in the evolution of early commercial country music. Among the most prominent early formats for country on the radio was the radio barn dance. The most popular example of this type of program was The National Barn Dance, broadcast from the 50,000-watt WLS station in Chicago. First going on the air in 1924, the program was originally conceived of as a rustic variety show. It featured an eclectic mix of country dance tunes, sentimental ballads, popular and heart songs, and updated traditional ballads interspersed with comedy routines, commercial advertisements, and even a remote broadcast from a professional ballroom dance orchestra for when “the barn

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47 Ibid., 94.

48 Ibid.
dance entertainers tired.” According to station director Edgar L. Bill, the initial idea for the program was to “simulate an old-fashioned barn dance.” To further this impression and to relax performers accustomed to playing in the presence of a live audience the program also incorporated a live studio audience. As it evolved, however, the radio barn dance was not for dancing, but for listening. One segment of the original format featured a square dance caller, but the segment was soon dropped, save for an annual dance contest broadcast once a year. Peterson pointed to the inadequate volume of early radios as a partial factor for this: “I know of no 1930s radio barn dance where the listening audience was actually invited to dance to the instructions of a caller. In all likelihood the radios generally available at the time could not generate enough sound to fill a hall of adequate size for a real barn dance.”

Even in the simulated “traditional” format of the radio barn dance the conventions and aesthetic criteria differed significantly from those of the socially grounded format it was designed to evoke. The leading performer in the pre-electric era had been the solo fiddler playing for dances and fiddling contests. Solo fiddlers were also a staple of radio barn dance programming early on, but the old-time square dance fiddle style proved monotonous on early radio receivers. Consequently, radio programmers sought out fiddlers who could also sing and who could incorporate a greater degree of instrumental variety. Overall, programming moved away from solo instrumentals toward an eclectic selection of short pieces tightly sequenced as in vaudeville shows. In providing free

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50 Ibid., 99-100.

51 Ibid., 99.
entertainment before pitching products for commercial sponsors the radio barn dance also resembled previous commercial formats like the old live medicine show. What separated the radio barn dance from its live predecessors was that the principle organizing reality in the new electronic format was the microphone.

For performers who had developed their craft performing on stage for live audiences the microphone became a point of contention. Early WSM Grand Ole Opry star Uncle Dave Macon became notorious among radio engineers for his abuse of the microphone. As he yelled, sang, and jumped around the stage, Macon frequently kicked over microphones, much to the delight of the live audience. Conversely, all the radio audience heard, as Peterson noted, was “hilarious laughter accompanied by what sounded like a violent fight on stage.” Macon and his contemporaries had developed their styles in the pre-electric era on the vaudeville stage and in large halls that required a clearly enunciated shouting style to be heard. The microphone lessened this requirement considerably, and small-voiced singers, soft-voiced crooning, and the intricate tight-harmony singing of “brother acts” like the Delmore Brothers, the Louvin Brothers, the Stanley Brothers, and the Monroe Brothers came to the fore in country music. With this shift the stage-oriented style of Macon and his ilk came to be considered archaic, forced, and corny, a fact that Macon and his vaudeville colleagues resented.

Transplanting music from the Southern oral tradition into commercially broadcast formats such as the radio barn dance required new aesthetic criteria and compelled new

52 Ibid., 100.
53 Ibid., 15, 98-99.
54 Ibid., 106.
55 Ibid., 106-07.
musical practices. Likewise, bringing the music into commercially recorded formats also entailed tangible aesthetic transformations. In the specialty recording field this can be seen particularly in regard to the racialization of musical aesthetics.

Early in the 1920s the specialty industry did not distinguish performers by race. They instead categorized music either by function (e.g., church music, play music, fiddle contest, lullaby, dance music) or by form (e.g., broadside, waltz, or ballad).\(^{56}\) Within these categories was a heterogeneous body of music in which there was minimal distinction between black and white elements, whether in terms of performance techniques or in terms of song selections. There were, of course, historical differences in black and white performance practice, but in the oral tradition musical techniques and repertoire passed rather freely between whites and blacks. This was particularly true in areas away from urban centers where contact between races was more informal and cultural sharing was less self-conscious.\(^{57}\) Agricultural historian Pete Daniel described the interaction between black and white rural Southerners in the tenant ranks:

Blacks and whites lived in the same neighborhood, sometimes worked for the same planter, and often exchanged help; they occasionally drank liquor, ate, and sang together; they suffered the same poor housing and were routinely cheated by the same landlord at settlement time. Still, tension simmered in the fissure between law and custom and could explode into violence, for in every community a shrill white minority, often encouraged by the county’s elite, fanatically monitored segregation’s mechanism. In the rural South people made their concessions to segregation’s dictates, but preferences in association in work and leisure continually violated the code.\(^{58}\)


Such back-and-forth exchange between poor blacks and whites was integral in the development of commercial country music from the outset. After being discovered by Peer on a recording session set up in 1927 in a hat factory in Bristol, Tennessee, the Carter Family (along with Jimmie Rodgers who was discovered at the same session), went on to become the first major recording stars in hillbilly music. The Carters attributed several songs from their popular records—“Cannonball Blues,” “I Know What it Means to be Lonesome,” and “Hello Stranger,” among others—to African-American guitarist Lesley Riddle. Riddle, who could memorize a song melody in a single hearing, frequently assisted A. P. Carter on his “song-catch ing” trips around Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky. The group’s guitarist, Maybelle Carter, also credited Riddle for teaching her the distinctive hybrid lead/rhythm guitar style she popularized in hillbilly and country music during her long recording and performing career, which lasted through the 1970s.  

Similarly, the “Travis picking” technique of country and rockabilly guitarists, such as Merle Travis, Chet Atkins, Scotty Moore, and Carl Perkins, grew out of a regional style attributed to African-American guitarist, fiddler, and Kentucky tradition bearer Arnold Shultz. Playing fiddle and guitar for square dances around western Kentucky kept Shultz in relatively close contact with white audiences and musicians. He was mentor to a number of white country guitarists such as Ike Everly (father of the Everly Brothers), Kennedy Jones, and Mose Rager, all who credited Shultz with teaching them a jazzy, syncopated, thumb-picking style of country guitar known regionally as the “Muh-

lenberg” style. Through Rager the technique made its way to Travis, who popularized it in commercial country music in the 1930s and 1940s, thus giving it the “Travis picking” moniker.

Shultz himself was never recorded, and few particulars are known about his life. Considering what is known about the types of venues and situations where he performed, and broader practices of the time and place, however, it is safe to speculate that his repertoire did not conform to any clear “white” or “black” aesthetic boundaries. A cousin of Shultz recalled his playing of old-time fiddle tunes such as “Waggoner” and “Old Hen Cackle” in their family band. Bill Monroe, who as a teenager accompanied Shultz at square dances around the area, credited Shultz with introducing him to the blues. Monroe recalled of his association in this way: “Me and him has played for some dances, you know, just the fiddle and guitar. But that’s where the blues come into my life, hearing old Arnold Shultz play ‘em.” Blues music at that time was a less strictly defined and more varied form than it is today. Still, with its jazz-inflected harmony, melodic syncopations against a dead-thumb bass, and sophisticated chording up the neck of the guitar, the country guitar style that Shultz introduced to the area shared as much with the ragtime-derived Piedmont blues of Blind Blake and Blind Willie McTell or even the Texas blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson than with other contemporaneous country guitar

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60 The name, “Muhlenberg” derived from the style’s origins in Western Kentucky’s Muhlenberg County.

61 Robert Cantwell, Bluegrass Breakdown, 31.


styles like Carter’s hillbilly “scratch.” Carter’s technique of playing the melody on the lower strings while accenting weak beats by flicking the backside of her fingernails over the treble strings owed more heavily to the clawhammer banjo technique of Appalachian dance bands, even though Carter herself claimed to have learned the style through Riddle, a black blues musician.

The cultural exchange worked both ways, and the influence of white country music made its way to black musicians as well. Robert Johnson, Bill Broonzy, Howlin’ Wolf, and B. B. King all cited Jimmie Rodgers as a major influence. Howlin’ Wolf claimed that his signature “howl” came from trying to imitate Rodgers’s yodel. In his autobiography B. B. King reported that Rodgers was “a yodeler who happened to be white, but who sang songs like ‘Blues, How Do You Do?’ They called him the Singing Brakeman and I sang along with him.” Junior Parker’s version of “Mystery Train” recorded for Sun in 1953, later covered by Elvis on Sun, uses for its refrain, “Train I ride, sixteen coaches long, Well that long black train carries my baby home.” This version is a slight phonetic and narrative alteration of the line “Train arrived, sixteen coaches long, The girl I love is on that train and gone” taken from “Worried Man Blues,” a song

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64 Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 31.


66 In Elvis’s version the Mystery Train takes his baby away again: “Well, that long black train got my baby and gone.”
recorded by the Carter Family in 1930, learned either from Riddle or possibly derived from a Celtic ballad.67

To untangle the black and white roots of hillbilly and race music any further by racially specific traits strictly based on performance practice or technique would be a highly complex task exceeding the scope of the current study. Suffice it to contend here that such a task had not been the original intention of the specialty-record industry either. Their decision in the latter half of the 1920s to begin classifying music according to the race of performers was instead an attempt at streamlined marketing based on the idea that records by blacks would sell more easily to blacks and music by whites would sell more easily to whites.68

The implementation of the racially bifurcated “race” and “hillbilly” system created a paradoxical situation in the specialty field. Musical sharing between blacks and whites continued to take place, while the racially-derived classification system increased sensitivity of musicians to issues of racial identity.69 In 1927, for example, the white Tennessee jugband / blues duo, The Allen Brothers, threatened to sue Columbia records when their record “Chattanooga Blues” was listed in both the 14000-D (black) series and the 15000-D (white) series, claiming that being designated in the black series was detrimental to sales among white record buyers. The recording industry’s decision to classify music by the race of performers did not singlehandedly create this growing split between white and black music. It was related to a number of other factors, such as urbanization,

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67 This same line from “Worried Man Blues” also appears in a number of traditional country ballads such as “In the Pines,” “Nine Hundred Miles,” and “Who Will Shoe Your Pretty Little Foot.” See Larry Bimbaum, Before Elvis: The Prehistory of Rock ‘n’ Roll (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 6.


69 Ibid.
previously discussed, which entailed more complex segregation codes. But however little the race / hillbilly system of classification initially had to do with the music itself, once in place it gave incentive for musicians to cultivate racially identified styles according to their intended audience. As a result the aesthetic split between race and hillbilly music widened over the course of the 1930s and early 1940s.

What race and hillbilly records retrieved from the past was ownership of music. In the first half of the twentieth century the primary source of revenue for the mainstream music industry was publishing royalties generated from sheet-music sales. In the oral folk tradition, however, the idea of publishing rights or ownership for a song was largely a foreign concept. In the absence of a score to document the origins of a piece of music or to confer authorship, it could “belong” to whoever performed it. “A performer could claim to be playing his or her own song,” observed Eric Rothenbuhler, “and yet tell who he or she learned it from and who else also performed it as their own, all without contradiction.”70 In oral tradition composition and performance were one and the same. The creation of songs was less an act of “composition” in the Western sense and more one of “collage” with musicians drawing on an anonymous shared pool of stock melodic, harmonic, rhythmic forms and lyrical themes, altering the material in the act of performance depending on the situation at hand.71 The introduction of recording technology into the oral tradition bridged the historical gap between performance and composition by fixing the fleeting and ephemeral phenomena of musical sounds to a tangible object, i.e., the phonograph record. Doing so made a performance—or at least its acoustic impression—


ownable, salable, mass-producible, and repeatable in a way that it was not in the oral tradition. Seizing on this, the specialty companies used recording technology to tap the vast body of previously uncopyrighted music in the Southern oral tradition, which the mainstream music industry had left relatively untouched. Turning this unpublished body of material into property, the rights to which could be bought, sold, and merchandised as sheet music or recordings, nonetheless, required a system of production different from that of the mainstream industry.72

In the Tin Pan Alley system the typical “life cycle” of a song from production to consumption went from written score to public performance to sheet music for private consumption. Songs that were written in-house by professional writers were popularized through exposure in Broadway musicals and “plugged” by vaudeville troupes and popular dance bands that essentially functioned as a promotional arm for publishing companies. Publishers, in turn, profited from the sales of sheet music for in-home performance on the piano. Around the turn of the century this process from selection to exhaustion of a song usually took around three years.73 The production system of race and hillbilly records radically compressed the timeframe of this cycle.74 This came by replacing the written score with recorded media and by creating more direct links between music producers and consumers through networks of independent radio stations and record distributors (compare the three-year process of early Tin Pan Alley with the two days it took for Elvis’s “That’s Alright” to hit the airwaves in the Mid-South).

72 Ibid.

73 Phillip H. Ennis, Seventh Stream, 43.

74 Robert Cantwell, Bluegrass Breakdown, 143-44.
The pop culture moment grew out of the deep situational changes discussed above: mass rural to urban migration from socio-technological upheaval of the Southern agricultural economy, shifting internal dynamics of the popular music ensemble due to electrification of the guitar, and new relations of production and consumption in the popular music industry that put rich, previously inaccessible musical resources at the disposal of musical amateurs and the mass audience. Along with these factors was an anticipation of the new—the potential of new musical and communication technologies, new social relations, and new musical practices. The cultural struggle over all of this played out within musical production itself.\(^75\)

Neither Elvis, nor Moore or Black was part of the Southern oral tradition to any meaningful extent. The commercializing and technologizing effects of the radio and recording industries were so pervasive that by the time of their generation no true oral tradition was, in fact, possible. According to Middleton:

> The performers whom the young Elvis heard and learned from—gospel singers, bluesmen like Arthur Crudup, Bill Broonzy, Junior Parker and Howlin’ Wolf, country and western stars such as Bob Wills, Hank Williams and Roy Acuff—were \textit{commercial} artists; they, like Elvis himself, did not separate themselves from the whole wash of music that was available.\(^76\)

Rather than an oral or written tradition, the bedrock of Elvis, Moore, and Black’s musical backgrounds was instead recorded and broadcast formats, most notably, those based in


\(^{76}\text{Ibid., 15.}\)
the race and hillbilly recording fields. What the race and hillbilly formats reversed into at the limits of their potential was rock ‘n’ roll. While the production system of race and hillbilly records had widened the difference between white and black musical aesthetics out of commercial considerations, rock ‘n’ roll, down to the name itself, was intended to obscure the racial origins of the music. “The term did double duty,” claimed Ennis; “While signaling the musical crossing of sensitive racial and moral boundaries, it also masked that announcement.”\textsuperscript{77} White musicians—Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis—crossed the racial boundary from one direction by drawing on black musical influences; black artists—Fats Domino and Chuck Berry—crossed it from the other by incorporating white country forms. Doing so, these early rock ‘n’ roll performers made race and hillbilly records obsolete by merging the racial split that these segregated formats had helped to engender. As with the initial split, this merger was likewise transacted for commercial reasons. In this instance it was to reach the “youth” market, a demographic which, up to that point in history had been considered to be of little cultural or economic importance. A new implied listener emerged: the teenage record buyer. Through public formats such as the jukebox and the sock hop that relied on the 45-rpm records, rock ‘n’ roll retrieved social dancing from the barn dance and big band-era swing. Lastly, rock ‘n’ roll enhanced the commerciality of race and hillbilly music by linking this system of production with the distribution and production capacities of major record labels and network radio during the mid-1950s rock ‘n’ roll explosion.

Narrowing down focus to the level of actual practice, it is evident that the advent of rock ‘n’ roll was less a single act of “invention” and more one of “recombination” of

\textsuperscript{77} Phillip H. Ennis, \textit{Seventh Stream}, 19.
preexisting elements. “The factors from the inside out,” contended Ennis on the formation of rock ‘n’ roll, “were informed by the most basic process shaping all the arts: the making of new pieces out of old pieces.” The recombination of pop, country, and rhythm and blues that Elvis’s Sun records achieved was realized through a process that integrated compositional methods derived from oral practice with the creative potential of the recording process and the studio space itself.

The recording studio space has both a physical and a social component. Phillips and his contemporaries in hillbilly and race recording were well known for their innovative miking techniques, which employed physical spaces of the studio (e.g., stairwells, hallways, or bathrooms) to capture unique reverberant sounds, echo, and other spatial effects. Such techniques were essential in the creative process for Elvis’s Sun sessions. But at least as important was the social component of the studio, specifically, the relative privacy of the studio environment.

For musicians of earlier generations accustomed to tailoring their performance to audience response in real time, like vaudeville performers transplanted into the radio barn dance format, the isolated environment of the studio was stifling. The production process for Elvis’s Sun sessions, on the other hand, required the absence of a live audience. He, Moore, and Black came into the studio virtually unrehearsed. Their one previous meeting was Elvis’s audition in Moore’s living room. There, Black had not even played but only watched with his bass propped up in the corner of the room. Furthermore, I can find no indication that, when Elvis went into the studio, he or any of the musicians had

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78 Ibid., 32.

79 Scotty Moore, That’s Alright, 56.
chosen any specific material to record. Such unpreparedness, obviously, would have
been unacceptable for most public performance situations or with standard studio proto-
col at the time. Phillips’s studio approach was considerably less formal than either of
these scenarios would have typically allowed. The objective of Elvis’s Sun sessions, as
per Phillips’s instructions to Moore, had been only to bring Elvis in to “see what he
sounds like coming back off the tape recorder.”80 Unlike older hillbilly and race record-
ing practices, Phillips did not bring Elvis in to procure new material for publishing royalties or to document a performance of an established group. It was instead to find a new
sound.

Even though Elvis had been around the studio a few times and had even made a
personal demo there previously, there is little indication that Phillips or anyone else had
seen or heard anything notable in the young singer prior to the studio sessions with
Moore and Black. As an unproven, untested young talent, Elvis was brought in solely on
the basis of potential. Phillips then developed this potential in the studio through a trial-
and-error approach, which related to the privacy of the studio and the technological im-
lications related to magnetic tape recording:

Elvis, Scotty, Bill and Sam built their music in the recording studio, the
first time anyone had ever created a major musical innovation except by
working it out in front of a live audience or by laboriously composing it on
paper first. Magnetic recording tape had only recently made it possible to
do a take of a song, listen to a playback, analyze it, then try another and
repeat the process. . . . This approach was liberating in two ways—it freed
them from the inhibiting effects of audience disapproval, and it liberated
them from a dependence on tyrannous songwriters since their new style

80 Sam Phillips, quoted in Zak Albin, I Don’t Sound Like Nobody: Remaking Music in 1950s America
would obliterate any previous version... none of the members was a skilled songwriter. 81

As Marsh noted, the privacy of the studio allowed the musicians to let their guard down, to “goof off,” and to take risks that the presence of a public audience would have squelched. It was famously at around midnight during a drink break toward the end the first Sun session that Elvis stumbled onto “That’s All Right.” After a session that up to that point had consisted of failed attempts at recording romantic ballad material, Elvis, according to Moore, was “jumping around, acting the fool,” and he and Black joined in. After the spontaneous outburst caught Phillips’s ear, the musicians honed their performance with Phillips’s guidance through several more takes before settling on a master. 82

The technological component of magnetic tape released the musicians from their “tyrannous dependence on songwriters” by providing an alternative means of composition for musically illiterate musicians and non-writers. For, in Cantwell’s words, “it is the notation itself which creates composers as such, and confers the right of proprietorship” (emphasis original). 83 Of Elvis’s ten singles released on Sun under the artist name “Elvis Presley, Scotty and Bill,” eight had previously recorded versions. Two, written in-house by Sun session musicians, were previously unrecorded (see Table 2.1). Replacing the score with a strictly aural medium gave performers a greater stake in the creative pro-

83 Robert Cantwell, Bluegrass Breakdown, 179.
Table 2.1. List of Sun Singles by Elvis Presley, Scotty Moore, and Bill Black (1954-1955) and artists of previous versions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELVIS PRESLEY, SCOTTY AND BILL</th>
<th>PREVIOUS ARTIST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE (ORIGINAL SUN ISSUE NUMBER)</td>
<td>(STYLE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“That’s All Right” (Sun 209)</td>
<td>Arthur Crudup (R&amp;B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Blue Moon of Kentucky” (Sun 209)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Good Rockin’ Tonight” (Sun 210)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I Don’t Care if the Sun Don’t Shine” (Sun 210)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Milk Cow Blues Boogie” (Sun 215)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You’re a Heartbreaker” (Sun 215)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Baby Let’s Play House” (Sun 217)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m Left, You’re Right, She’s Gone” (Sun 217)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I Forgot to Remember to Forget” (Sun 223)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mystery Train” (Sun 223)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

cess, as in the “old methods” of the oral/aural tradition where composition and performance were one and the same.

Indeed, significant aspects of the creative process at Sun—the emphasis on extemporaneity and spontaneity, and the performers piecing together “their own” versions of songs through a collage of preexisting material and stylistic elements—all reflected practices and attitudes characteristic of the oral tradition. Elvis, like a number of his contemporaries in early rock ‘n’ roll—Bo Diddley (Mississippi), Little Richard and Ray Charles (Georgia), Jerry Lee Lewis, Lloyd Price, and Fats Domino (Louisiana), and
Wanda Jackson (Oklahoma)—came from poor and working-class cultures in the South characterized by a high degree of residual orality. (Chuck Berry, reared in a middle-class family in St. Louis, represents a notable exception to this model.) But to touch momentarily on aesthetic considerations, insofar as they relate to the production process, while acknowledging the significance of oral practices in the creative process for Elvis’s Sun sessions, these practices should be distinguished from the oral tradition for the fact that the aesthetic end product was specifically conceived as a recording from the start. As such, as Benjamin argued in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” with any mechanically or electronically reproduced form, the work of art must always be perceived from the perspective of the mode of production. In film, the main subject of Benjamin’s essay, the perspective of the spectator is necessarily that of the camera eye; in a musical recording it is the perspective of the microphone. Because the microphone is the primary organizing reality of the recording studio, it implies a set of priorities, attitudes, limitations, and opportunities that are distinct from those of the true oral tradition.

According to Albin J. Zak, it is a basic principle of record production that “Making records is an empirical process guided and informed by physical perception. Compositional decisions are based on responses to specific aural images, and ears are the windows through which all evaluations are made.” The “compositional” aspect of the recording process that Zak’s description alludes to was made possible by the advent of magnetic tape recording. By the time of Elvis’s Sun sessions Phillips had only recently

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85 Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production (New York: Classic Books America, 2009), viii; posted online.

converted to tape after purchasing two Ampex 350 tape recorders in early 1954. 87 Phillips had previously cut most of his masters to acetate disc. Compared to discs, tape was quicker, cheaper, and reusable, which allowed musicians to develop their approach through multiple takes and playbacks. Theodore Gracyk highlighted the importance of the ability to do multiple takes in the creative process for these Sun sessions: “The three musicians performed over and over, altering the tempo here, the melody there, the phrasing elsewhere, surveying take after take until they arrived at a synthesis that was strikingly original.” 88 As with Zak’s description of record making, the process that Gracyk described was also compositional in that it involved contemplation and editing and was carried out over the course of multiple takes and revisions. It differed, however, from the conventional Western notion of composition in that it did not involve the writing of new material per se.

To consider further the notion of composition as it related to the recording process of Elvis’s Sun records it is helpful to consider differing notions of musical development. Andrew Chester in his article “Second Thoughts on a Rock Aesthetic: The Band,” distinguished between two types of musical development. 89 The first is extensional development. Western classical devices such as counterpoint, theme and variations, and sonata form operate primarily on extensional principles. In these forms complex melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic structures are built outward from simple combinations of musical elements (e.g., played or sung notes, basic beats). Variations produced by extensional

87 Colin Escott and Martin Hawkins, Good Rockin’ Tonight, 18.
88 Theodore Gracyk, Rhythm and Noise, 14.
development take place mainly in the realm of form and abstract musical structure. Through the rigorous adherence to standard timbres and written notation typical of Western art music, room for variation of the actual sounds themselves is limited, and the basic musical elements (e.g., the pitches themselves and the basic articulation of the beat) remain unchanged in the complex whole. *Intensional development*, conversely, relates more to variations in the physical aspects of musical sound, such as rhythmic phrasing, pitch modulation, and timbral shading, all of which are traditionally executed in real-time during performance. With intensional development the complex is not constructed through building outward with simple elements but through rhythmic and pitch modulations taking place *within* the basic pitch and beats themselves. Here the discreet musical elements are subject to a high degree of variation, as in intensionally constructed forms such as the rural blues where this type of development produces complex variations within the set twelve-bar structure.  

Comparing Elvis, Scotty, and Bill’s Sun recordings with previously recorded versions shows changes in the source material resulting from both extensional and intensional development. Changes to “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” for example, such as the addition of the new eight-bar introductory section, speeding up the tempo, and changing the meter from the original triple meter to 2/4, are changes made by extensional procedures. Intensional developments are found in the alteration of the rhythmic feel, or “groove,” resulting from all three musicians playing on top of or slightly ahead of the

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beat and in the “playful voicedness” (to use Alan Lomax’s term) of Elvis’s vocal performance, which employs extreme swings in pitch, timbre, dynamics, and enunciation from phrase to phrase and sometimes within a single syllable.

As none of the group was a songwriter as such, significant structural alterations such as those on “Blue Moon of Kentucky” are fairly rare in the rest of Elvis’s Sun catalogue. The most radical transformations of source material are instead achieved in intensional development within standard country, blues, and pop song forms. Intensional structures being far less amenable to notation than extensional ones, these historically fall outside of the scope of composition in the Western sense. Tape, however, as an aural form of documentation, fixes intensional structures in a reproducible format, thus allowing them to be contemplated, studied, and appreciated alongside extensional elements of musical construction.

Thus, as tape recording facilitated a more analytical, contemplative compositional element in the recording process, it simultaneously captured spontaneous elements of a performance: improvisations, rhythmic and timbral variations, phrasing, diction, and accent. Furthermore, it captured quirks, accidents, and non-musical gestures such as Elvis’s “whoop” at the end of “Mystery Train” when he thought he had botched the take. It captured strictly sonic elements: the sound of Elvis’s voice at that particular age, on that particular day, Moore’s electric guitar tone, and the percussive snap of Black’s bass strings on the fretboard. Purely technical elements were incorporated as well—the physical proximity of the microphone, recording levels, tape hiss, tape saturation, echo

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92 Lomax uses this term to describe the style of singers from the Bantu-African Hunter core. See Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture*, 1968 (London: Transaction, 2009), 94-95.

93 Rob Bowman, “Impulse towards Transculturation,” *Crawdaddy*. 
effects, and microphone bleed—all contributed to the aural *mise en scène* of what is a total work.

The recording in this sense is ontologically “thick.” It does not consist of only an abstract sound structure as in Western art music or the Tin Pan Alley popular songs, nor is it only a performance as in oral tradition. All of these examples are ontologically thinner.  

It is instead composed of all of these elements—extensional and intensional developments, spontaneous and premeditated musical gestures, non-musical gestures, and technical artifacts from the recording medium—all in one *specific* combination represented by the recorded master. In the case of Elvis’s Sun records these elements were combined—or recombined—in such a way as to create an aesthetic effect altogether different from preceding recordings or performances of the source material. While the creative process for this recombination drew on preexisting practices derived from both written and oral traditions, the configuration of the constituent sonic elements were fixed in time by magnetic tape and situated in space by the microphone. The process was ultimately a technological one—to recall Cantwell’s words, “a new art based on the technology itself.”

Whereas musicians in the early years of hillbilly and race recording and the radio barn dances had to modify their performance practice to fit the demands of the recording

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94 Gracyk has argued that a work such as Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* that can be grasped through performances on a wide variety of instruments is ontologically thin. It is more or less an abstract sound structure. A record, on the other hand, when the work is conceived of as a recording (and not simply a performance that happens to be recorded) is ontologically thicker. It is composed of the performance, the song, and all its constituent sonic features. As a film is recovered by watching a screening, the essential properties of the record can only be recovered by listening to a copy (phonograph, tape, mp3, etc.) derived from the original master tape. While one could know the song “Mystery Train,” for example, from sheet music, one would only know Elvis’s record by hearing a copy derived from the master recording made at Sun in 1955. See Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 18-21.

95 Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 184.
and radio studio, Elvis, Moore, and Black faced the opposite dilemma when the band experienced problems in their early public performances trying to recreate the sound of their records through primitive public address systems of the time. The thin texture of the standard three-piece hillbilly instrumentation of standup bass, acoustic guitar, and electric guitar—although crisp, dynamic, immediate, and uncluttered on record—failed to translate in performance halls without the benefit of Phillips’s miking techniques and studio treatment. The rhythmic effect of Phillips’s short, hard, “slapback” echo, in particular, played such a central part on several of the records that it nearly functioned as an instrument in its own right. 96

In actuality the slapback effect was not echo, but instead an effect created when Phillips doubled a recorded signal with a delayed copy of itself by running his two tape machines slightly out of sync during mixdown. Being a virtual effect, it was impossible to recreate in an actual physical space. To attempt to recreate Phillips’s echo in a live setting Moore in early 1955 purchased a custom-built EchoSonic amplifier with a built-in tape-delay unit, which he used extensively up through 1968 to emulate the studio echo in live performances. 97

The scenario of Moore, emulating the sound of his recorded self in live performance and attempting to recreate a virtual “echo” impossible to achieve in any real physical space, provides one illustration of how the recording-oriented mindset carried over to shape practices even outside of the studio. Another example of this recording-oriented mindset is found in a recollection of drummer D. J. Fontana. Fontana was added to the group late in the Sun period to help flesh out the sound on the road and went on to record

96 Colin Escott, Good Rockin’, 68.

97 James V. Roy, “EchoSonic Amplifier” (www.scottymoore.net/echosonic.html).
with the band after Elvis moved to RCA. During an early RCA recording session Fon-
tana recalled Elvis instructing him to “play it simple” because cover bands would need to
play “exactly what we’re playing,” and “some of these guys in those club bands can’t
learn this stuff if it gets too complicated.”98 Elvis, having learned primarily from records
himself, understood it was the records that would be the model for future performances,
ot only for him and his ensemble, but also for the club bands who would unofficially
plug their records in dancehalls across the country.99

The formula of crossing white country with black rhythm and blues—of a “white
singer with the negro sound and feel”—that Phillips conceived at Sun may have been
audacious to a degree considering the time and place, but in and of itself it was hardly
revolutionary. The cross-pollination of black and white music had been commonplace in
the oral folk tradition and was a central theme in the evolution of commercial country
music. “The Father of Country Music,” Jimmy Rodgers, as much as anything was a
blues singer. He was a white who sang “black” although at that time what was con-
sidered “black” was not yet as clearly defined in the commercial industry as it would later
become.100 And by 1953, a year before Elvis’s first Sun record, Bill Haley had already
scored a national hit merging country and rhythm and blues with “Crazy Man Crazy.”
Elvis was not alone in crossing the color line, and simply doing so was never a guarantor
of commercial success. But blacks and whites throughout the country crossed this line
with greater frequency in the years after World War II as changes in the music industry


100 That Rodgers was a blues singer was widely acknowledged not only in the field of country music but
among black blues singers and fans as well. See Steve Cheseborough, *Blues Travelling*, 214.
brought the systems of production for hillbilly and race music closer together. And while Phillips’s production techniques presented the recorded material in a way that highlighted the group’s unique interpretive abilities, this was not solely a technical achievement. Les Paul, for example, with hits like “Nola,” “Mockin’ Bird Hill,” and “How High the Moon” was employing homemade tape effects and unorthodox miking and recording techniques in mainstream pop as early as 1950. The sound-on-sound method of multitrack tape recording that Paul employed on these records was considerably more advanced than any techniques used by Phillips at Sun, as Philips preferred to cut songs live in the room and used overdubs and tape edits only sparingly.

The innovations at Sun were not the result of devising a specific musical form, performance style, or recording technique. Where Elvis’s Sun sessions represented the most radical departure from established industry practices, either from those of mainstream popular music or of race and hillbilly recording at the time was in reconceptualizing the process of production for popular music. Elvis’s first recording sessions for RCA in Nashville in early 1956 were in many respects RCA’s attempt to recreate this process. Compared to Phillips’s essentially one-man operation, the financial and technical resources at RCA’s Nashville studio far exceeded those at Sun, but trying to emulate practices at Sun proved baffling for the engineers and the producers there. The first difficulty the engineers encountered was trying to recreate the echo. The closest imitation they managed came by placing a microphone and amplifier at opposite ends of a long hallway at the front of the building. This technique created a heavy reverb quite different from the rhythmic slapback of Phillips’s tape effect. ¹⁰¹ Besides this technical dilemma there

was mounting pressure to produce new material as the sessions from January to April had produced only one single, “Heartbreak Hotel.” Steve Sholes, who headed RCA’s specialty division, was nominally in charge of the sessions, although it was his protégé Chet Atkins, who actually ran the sessions on the studio floor. While Elvis, Moore, and Black had gained seasoning on the road touring for the Sun singles, it became clear that RCA’s approach in the studio was not yielding results comparable to those of the Sun sessions.  

With progress at an impasse, Sholes at one point considered hiring Phillips to produce on a freelance basis. Instead he opted to move the sessions to New York in July 1956. After the move he essentially left Elvis in charge of the sessions, allowing him to guide the musicians and producers through upwards of thirty takes of a track and giving him the final say in which cut would be the final master. At a time when musicians were generally excluded from any part of the studio process besides performance or writing (sometimes arranging), giving a musician this amount of creative control was unprecedented for a major studio, especially considering that Elvis, then twenty-one years old, had no formal training in either music or sound engineering.

**Conclusion**

Key elements of situational change addressed in this chapter were related to technology: electric guitar, farm mechanization, and records and radio, all set the stage for the pop culture moment and the rock ‘n’ roll explosion. The role of technology was not determinative, however. As the entrance of recording into the Southern oral tradition had served to widen the gap between white and black music from the late 1920s through the

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1940s, the same technological format brought them closer together in the postwar years due to factors to be discussed in subsequent chapters of this study. The impact of Elvis’s unprecedented rapid rise to superstardom on RCA in 1956 had such a massive impact throughout the entertainment industry that it constituted an element of situational change in and of itself. It brought popular music to the fore in youth culture, and it forced major studios to rethink their production methods from the ground up. In doing so, it granted young working class amateurs greater access to the popular music industry. Sun studio closed its doors in 1968 as album-oriented rock and underground FM radio obsolesced the singles-oriented production model that had launched rockabilly and early rock ‘n’ roll. The practices developed at Sun—in combining amateur enthusiasm, professional guidance, and informal experimentation to develop talent and material through the act of recording itself—transcended any particular style, genre, or technological format and created the blueprint for the studio process in popular music recording through the following decades.
Chapter Three

THE RISE OF THE INDEPENDENTS:

LAW, REGULATION, AND RESOURCE INTERDEPENDENCE

Mass media formations are highly complex conglomerations. Large-scale cultural changes within them develop over the course of an incalculable number of economic, political, social, and aesthetic transactions. This is true even with cultural shifts that arise seemingly suddenly or inevitably, such as those of the pop culture moment. These transactions range in level of engagement from passive to active, in economic impact from miniscule to massive, and in social and political intent from revolutionary to reactionary. They take an array of forms and may originate on any level from the individual to the institutional. From placing a coin in the jukebox, buying a record, changing the channel, or organizing a boycott to attending a concert, joining a band, forming a union, or finalizing a corporate merger, it was the accumulated effects of these and innumerable other activities that spurred the radical cultural and aesthetic shifts of the pop culture moment. As nearly all of these activities played out within the legal and regulatory framework of the commercial music industry, changes in law and regulation were imperative in shaping the nature of these aesthetic and cultural transformations.

The growing network of small upstart record labels and radio stations that formed in the popular music field after World War II—known collectively as “the independents” —provided the crucible for essential developments in the formation and emergence of rock ‘n’ roll. Previously, limitations of production and distribution had confined the commercial impact of the independents mainly to a local and regional scale. A sharp rise in the number of independent radio stations, however, combined with strengthening
informal ties between independent record companies and radio stations made it possible by the late 1940s for such small labels to achieve national distribution and airplay without support of national networks, publishers, or labels. Unlike the white pop aesthetic of national networks and labels, commercial success for the independents came in large part by targeting black audiences through blues, rhythm and blues, and gospel programming. Black-oriented formats found favor with whites too, especially with youth audiences. Such programming played an essential part in Elvis’s own musical upbringing and served eventually as the launch pad for the meteoric commercial success of his Sun records. Beyond this, it also provided the catalyst for a larger-scale industry move toward black and black-inspired programming. This came during the mid-1950s as growing competitive pressure from the independents compelled major labels and networks to implement the racially integrated format of rock ‘n’ roll as the dominant form of mainstream programming.

As a number of studies have shown, changing legal and regulatory conditions played a major role in structural changes in the postwar music industry, which facilitated the rise of independent records and radio.¹ In this chapter I argue that significant aspects of this industry restructuring and related aesthetic and cultural transformations can be seen by examining the effects of legal and regulatory shifts on resource interdependence within the popular music industry. Building on historical analysis from Peterson in “Why 55?,” Ennis in The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll [sic] in American

Popular Music, Russell Sanjek and David Sanjek in American Popular Music Business in the 20th Century, and Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross in Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting, I focus on four areas of law and regulation: copyright law, unionization, patent law, and governmental regulation / deregulation. Integrating these materials with a resource interdependence model adapted from Jonathan Tankel and Wenmouth Williams’s study “From AM to FM: Radio Economics and the Shift from AM to FM, 1965-1978,” I focus on the impact of changes in these areas of law and regulation on shifting power dynamics in the popular music industry. I assess power in terms of control of two essential industry commodities: musical programming material (i.e., performance rights, live musicians, recorded music) and market access (i.e., radio airtime, retail shelf space). Through this I aim to show an overall shift in industry conditions from a relatively high degree of resource interdependence among independent firms and national companies during the network era to relatively low resource interdependence among these parties during the late 1940s and 1950s. I explore the role of lowered resource interdependence on decentralization of power in the broadcasting and recording industries, which, I argue, lowered logistic and economic barriers of entry and loosened control of national firms whose discriminatory programming policies excluded blacks and purveyors of black-oriented musical formats.

Examining the rise of the independents from the perspective of resource interdependence, I contend that the fact the first major breakthrough of black and black-inspired cultural forms into mainstream American culture happened specifically in the field of popular music (and not in another mass-media field such as television, film, or print.

Looking first to effects of copyright law, I highlight the role of disputes over music licensing between broadcasters and publishers in radio broadcasters’ decisions to adopt black music as an alternate resource for musical programming apart from the Tin Pan Alley popular song catalogue. Next I show the role of musicians’ unions in inadvertently pushing independent radio from live music to phonograph records as the preferred resource for musical programming. I then focus on how patent law disputes between major record manufacturers influenced the design and adoption of the 45-rpm singles record. I also consider the role of this new consumer record format in changing record distribution patterns, which gave independent labels access to the national record market for the first time. In the fourth section I highlight the part played by Federal Communications Commission (FCC) deregulation in the shift from a national to a local/regional market structure in the broadcasting industry. In the final section, drawing on Robert C. Kloosterman and Chris Quispel’s article “Not Just the Same Old Song on My Radio: An Analysis of the Role of Radio in the Diffusion of Black Music among Whites in the South of the United States on America, 1920 to 1960,” I relate transformations in production and distribution patterns for broadcast and recorded media to new modes of music consumption emerging after World War II, particularly the growing popularity of black music among young whites in the Jim Crow South.

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Resource Interdependence: Power Dynamics in Commercial Media Systems

According to the resource dependence model originally formulated by George Gerbner, later adapted by Joseph Turow and Tankel and Williams, power in commercial mass-media systems is defined as the ability to impose sanctions over other institutions. This ability is inversely related to the extent an organization must directly or indirectly concede to other participants in the production/transmission process. Turow’s model delineated thirteen power roles that participants in media processes may fill: Producer (prepares material/programming for public consumption), Authority (issues government sanctions), Investor (contributes money), Patron (purchases time/resources), Auxiliary (provides material supplies), Creator (provides talent), Union (regulates personnel), Distributor (selects material for dissemination), Exhibitor (offers material to audience), Linking Pin (moves material to and from production firms), Facilitator (helps production firms), Pressure Group (demands policy support), and Public (audience).

Power roles are not exclusive. On the individual scale, Elvis, for example, as a performer may be seen as primarily occupying the role of Creator. On the other hand,

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7 Ibid., 159.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 159-60.
when considering the prominent place of mass media formats such as records and radio in his musical upbringing, it may also be pertinent to view his role as a consumer of music, *i.e.*, as a member of the Public. The resource interdependence model permits for such flexibility, allowing participants to move among different power roles or to be viewed in multiple roles simultaneously. This mobility of roles applies to participants on the institutional level as well. A radio network may be viewed as fulfilling the role of Producer. But to understand how a network arrives at choices in programming requires examination of its role as Exhibitor as well in creating the final link connecting the Creator with the Public.\(^10\) Finally, there are no preordained relationships of power among roles. Just as participants may move fluidly among roles, power relationships among roles may change at any time. This can happen in response to actions of participants in other power roles. A small network affiliate (Exhibitor), for example, being nearly completely dependent on network programmers (Producer) for programming material may have little to no control over programming decisions. An affiliate board, however, comprised of multiple stations (Exhibitor) may hold more sway by controlling market access required for networks (Producer) to reach the mass audience (Public).\(^11\) Power dynamics may shift in response to external factors as well. For example, government (Authority) rationing of electronic material (Auxiliary) during War World II curtailed expansion of the broadcasting industry (Exhibitors) by limiting the number of new commercial transmitters built. This kept the number of stations in each market small and buttressed network dominance of the radio industry until the late 1940s.

\(^{10}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{11}\) *Ibid.*
Thus, power dynamics are not determined by the specific function of participants in these roles, but from the relationships among participants. Hence, Tankel and Williams’s use of the term “interdependence,” as opposed to the term “dependence” used previously by Turow.\textsuperscript{12} In this respect the analytical perspective of the resource interdependence model differs from the “linear” approach of some previous historical accounts of the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll and its immediate stylistic antecedents.

An example of this linear perspective is found in Charlie Gillett’s 1970 book, \textit{The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll}. In the introduction to the book Gillett posits his underlying analytical assumption that the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll stands as proof that audiences and creators may “determine the content of a popular art communicated through mass media.”\textsuperscript{13} Along this line he offered a Parsonian explanation for national networks’ and labels’ decision to adopt black radio formats:\textsuperscript{14}

Throughout the late forties and early fifties, increasing numbers of white adolescences [sic] became interested in black “rhythm and blues” music. By 1956 this group had grown so large that its taste was reflected in the hit parades. The change in attitudes (as the Parsons model suggests) forced a change in institutions. The large radio stations, which at first had resisted the broadcasting of records by black singers by suggesting that the words of the songs were corrupting America’s youth, were obliged to play the records or give up their audience to the smaller stations that did play the records. The major record companies, which had recorded black singers with white styles, or white singers with black songs, yielded to smaller independent companies that recorded black singers with their own songs and styles.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.}


\textsuperscript{14} For further elaboration on Parsons’s view on cultural change, see Chapter One of the current study, 6-7.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, xx-xxi.
Taken at face value, Gillett’s assessment is largely accurate. Changing musical tastes of young white record buyers and radio listeners and growing competitive pressure from the independents were, indeed, the immediate factors that compelled the majors’ decision to implement black and black-inspired programming. But, in suggesting that audiences (Public) and singers (Creator) unilaterally forced this change on radio, this explanation neglects the fact that in the commercial music industry the power of audiences and creators was rarely wielded directly. It was instead mediated through the market—a political construction constituted primarily by property-right laws. Gillett’s “demand-side” explanation, by sidestepping this fact, minimizes essential changes originating on the institutional level.

Radio’s initial turn to black music earlier in the 1940s had not, in fact, been in response to changing audience tastes. It was instead legal disputes between publishers (Producer) and broadcasters (Exhibitor) that pushed radio to incorporate black music on a large scale for the first time. Furthermore, the growing competitiveness of the independents in the mid-1950s was due not only to their alternative programming aesthetic, but also to major shifts in the structure of the broadcasting industry and in record distribution patterns, which gave unprecedented market access for small, poorly funded labels based in the race and hillbilly record markets. Greater market access combined with independent radio’s (Exhibitor) growing reliance on independent record labels (Producer) for programming translated into unprecedented exposure for black rhythm and blues records to new audiences, which, in turn, fueled the popularity of black records among young white audiences (Public).
Thus, I argue in this chapter that the changing attitudes of whites toward black music at this time did not “force” these institutional changes as much as it was facilitated by them and developed alongside of them. Therefore, I do not attempt to attribute causality to any one factor, institution, or individual. To the contrary, by examining effects of law and regulation on resource interdependence I attempt to illuminate the high degree of integration among roles that is required for new cultural attitudes to become routinized, established, and institutionalized in everyday practice. The subject of law and regulation naturally draws attention to issues of power, governance, and institutional organization. But by focusing on changing power relationships (instead of making a priori assumptions of power) and by highlighting ways in which power is gained, lost, and mediated, I aim to shed light on issues of agency and conflict that arise as participants struggle for control over limited industry resources.

Copyright Law: Publishers vs. Broadcasters

With the passage of the U. S. Copyright Act of 1909, Congress (Authority) provided the financial basis of the modern American commercial music industry, for the first time giving legal protection for owners of musical compositions. The law provided three avenues for writers (Creator) and publishers (Producer) to be compensated for performances of their works. The first required payment of royalties from sales of printed sheet music. Second, the Act also provided for returns from “public performances for

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profit,” which covered works played in dance halls, cabarets, restaurants, and hotels.

Third, “mechanical” royalties specified that payments be made from sales of piano rolls.

The three-pronged royalty system that the Copyright Act established formed the basis of what Ennis has called the “three-legged money stool” of the popular music industry, which continues to serve as its basic financial framework to the present day.\(^1\)

The sweep of the Copyright Act was considerably wider than that of European laws at the time and funded an aggressive music publishing industry based primarily in New York City.\(^2\) What the Act did not provide was a mechanism for collection of royalties owed. To remedy this, New York publishers and songwriters in 1914 organized their own privately held licensing agency, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) (Union).

At first ASCAP was not successful in its efforts, but by the 1920s it had become highly effective, both in collecting and distributing earnings among its members and in policing copyright infringements (Authority).\(^3\) Initially, the largest share of the Society’s profits came from sheet music, but over the course of the 1920s and 1930s revenues moved increasingly toward recorded and broadcasted forms of dissemination. Royalties from phonograph recordings were incorporated relatively easily into the existing provision for mechanical fees. Unlike record companies (Producer), however, broadcasters (Exhibitor) did not profit directly from the sale of popular music, but from the sale of

\(^1\) Philip H. Ennis, Seventh Stream, 42-43.

\(^2\) Ibid.

airtime to sponsors (Patron). For this reason, it was less clear how broadcast music fit into existing performance-rights laws.

It was left to the publishers (Producer) and broadcasters (Exhibitor) to hash out among themselves who would pay for and profit from popular music played on the radio. This struggle played out primarily in the courts. Initially broadcasters refused to pay at all for radio play of ASCAP-licensed music. After ASCAP threatened a lawsuit for copyright infringement, broadcasters responded by forming their own adversarial organization, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) (Union) in 1922. After nearly a decade of acrimonious legal wrangling between ASCAP and NAB the accumulated weight of rulings squarely favored the publishers. Having lost in the courts, NAB (Pressure Group) appealed to the Department of Justice and to Congress (Authority) to pass legislation to dissolve ASCAP. Being unsuccessful in this as well, NAB finally conceded to ASCAP’s demands. In 1932 the first comprehensive contract between publishers and broadcasters was signed. The agreement required every commercial station pay an annual blanket fee according to station size (instead of per-program rates where stations only paid for music they actually used) as well as a percentage of gross revenue in exchange for playing ASCAP-licensed music. The contract was a decisive victory for the publishers (Producer) and a major sticking point for the broadcasters (Exhibitor) going forward. Tensions between parties grew. The need for programming material on the part of the broadcasters (Exhibitor) and the need for access to the radio audience on

21 Philip H. Ennis, Seventh Stream, 63.

22 Ibid.


24 Ibid., 58, 63.
the part of publishers (Producer), however, continued to drive the radio and publishing industries closer together into an increasingly uneasy alliance.

The stock market crash in 1929 severely reduced sales of sheet music and phonograph records, but the radio industry continued to thrive. As a result, radio replaced sheet music as the most profitable leg of ASCAP’s money stool. Publishers adapted their hit-making machinery to the technology of radio, using late-night remote broadcasts of popular dance bands as their main method of song plugging. This arrangement effectively sealed radio’s position as the only viable vehicle to make or break a hit song. Still, with their firm legal footing in copyright protection, publishers maintained a virtual monopoly on the popular music catalogue. This ensured that broadcasters (Exhibitor) were almost completely dependent on publishers (Producer) for programming.

Popular music was the most important source of programming for radio, growing from around sixty percent of total programming in 1933 to seventy five percent by 1940. Publishers used ASCAP control of the popular music catalogue as a powerful negotiating tool, pushing through a series of publisher-favorable contracts and raising licensing rates charged to broadcasters virtually at will. Publisher dominance over broadcasters reached a tipping point in 1937, however, after ASCAP announced an unprecedented seventy percent increase in royalty rates for radio music. NAB responded

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26 Russell Sanjek and David Sanjek, *American Popular Music Business*, 74


by redoubling efforts to establish an independent broadcaster-owned pool of new popular music. Having at-tempted this unsuccessfully on two previous occasions, this time the broadcasters prevailed. The result was the creation of Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI) (Union / Producer) in 1939.

BMI was originally conceived only as a stopgap to give NAB leverage in impending negotiations with ASCAP for the renewal of the contract set to expire at the end of 1940. But when the negotiations failed to produce an arrangement acceptable to broadcasters, BMI was made permanent.  

On expiration of the contract on 1 January 1941 radio instituted an industry-wide boycott on all ASCAP music. During this time radio sustained itself solely on music from the newly formed BMI catalogue. Government intervention ended the boycott after only ten months with, oddly enough, both ASCAP and the major radio networks being forced to sign consent decrees with the Department of Justice (Authority) to avoid pending antitrust suits. Afterward, BMI and ASCAP quickly settled their differences and agreed on a contract acceptable to both parties.

Despite the unceremonious ending, the boycott represented the first decisive success for broadcasters in their fight with ASCAP. By the end of it ASCAP had lost $4 million in revenue from missed radio royalties, and broadcasters (Exhibitor) had demonstrated their independence from publishers (Producer) for musical programming, at least temporarily.

30 Ibid.
32 Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross, Stay Tuned, 214.
Even though specific aesthetic considerations had been an afterthought, the broadcasters’ boycott had immediate effects on the dominant aesthetic of radio programming. ASCAP (Producer) control of the popular music catalogue had severely limited the variety of music on the radio (Exhibitor) to a narrow, homogenized aesthetic that consisted almost entirely of finely crafted songs based on abstract love themes, high-profile melodies, and subdued jazz rhythms and harmonies. ³³ As Peterson put it:

“Tea for Two,” “Stardust” and “Always” come to mind as exemplars of this aesthetic. But the point [sic] 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. ³⁴

The boycott changed this situation almost overnight. Exclusive play of BMI music brought an influx of Latin, folk, blues, hillbilly, and other styles that had previously been excluded from the ASCAP catalogue, greatly increasing the variety of radio programming. In their attempt to sidestep ASCAP’s copyright restrictions the broadcasters had first tried to lure defectors from ASCAP. When this failed, broadcasters turned to non-ASCAP publishers such as M. M. Cole of Chicago and Peer International, who specialized in hillbilly, cowboy, and rhythm and blues songs. They also leased the rights to the catalogue of the E. B. Marks Company, whose ASCAP contract was set to expire, and to public domain pieces whose licenses had already expired. ³⁵ After the boycott publishers renewed their efforts to push their mainstream white aesthetic on radio and to a consider-


³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Russell Sanjek and David Sanjek, American Popular Music Business, 64-65.
able extent were successful. But BMI music continued to be played alongside ASCAP selections on the radio.  

The final major component in BMI’s success was audience response (Public). Programming decisions such as the broadcasters’ (Producer) choice to incorporate alternative genera into the BMI catalogue ultimately required approval of the audience (Public) to be sustainable. Indeed, attracting an audience was the main requirement for obtaining the broadcasters’ most valuable resource—advertising dollars (Patron). The role of the audience at this time, however, was almost entirely a passive one. It was in expressing essentially no reaction to the removal of ASCAP music from the radio during the boycott that the radio audience, in effect, legitimized BMI as a viable alternative to ASCAP as a resource for musical programming.  

BMI’s success also demonstrated the commercial potential of the body of music that would go on to provide the stylistic raw material for early rock ‘n’ roll. With the establishment of BMI, it became possible for artists (Creator) to make a living for the first time writing and publishing in rhythm and blues, hillbilly music, and other alternative genera. BMI’s methods differed from those of ASCAP in technical ways as well. First, unlike with ASCAP, BMI composers and songwriters were paid royalties not only for live performances but for recorded performances as well—both for commercial phonographs and for electrical transcriptions (16-inch aluminum or acetate discs licensed solely for broadcast purposes). Secondly, while ASCAP’s seniority-based payment scale 


was weighted in favor of older members and established hits, BMI calculated payments solely based on the number of current plays. In this way the BMI payment schedule incentivized the creation of new songs. Essentially building a music catalogue from scratch, in these early years BMI averaged one new popular song per day along with twenty-five new arrangements of public domain songs published per week. 39 Lastly, whereas ASCAP’s sampling frame only tracked performances in New York (later, in Hollywood as well), BMI tracked plays nationally, making it possible for a hit song to originate in any city in the nation. 40 In all of these ways the establishment of BMI moved control over the popular music catalogue further away from the New York publishing industry, both economically and geographically.

In all of the aforementioned ways—by creating commercial opportunities for creators in alternative genera, increasing demand for new songs, and decentralizing the locus of production—the establishment of BMI was essential for the formation of the pop culture moment. Two other major industry transformations were required for the national emergence of rock ‘n’ roll, however. These were the ascendance of the phonograph record as the main source of musical programming for the radio industry and the explosive expansion of independent radio in the late 1940s. In the next two sections I examine the first of these transformations by considering the role of legal and regulatory factors in strengthening ties between the broadcasting (Exhibitor) and recording industries (Producer) looking first to the role of musicians’ unions (Union) and then to patent law disputes between record manufacturers (Producers).


As publishers were trying to tap into radio's growing revenues, musicians and bandleaders also vied for their share of the takings. Unlike publishers and writers, however, performers were not compensated for mechanical or broadcast reproductions of a musical work under the Copyright Act. In efforts to rectify this, prominent national bandleaders Fred Waring and Paul Whiteman spearheaded a performer's-rights movement, forming the National Association of Performing Artists (NAPA) (Union / Pressure Group). Modeling the group after ASCAP, NAPA lawyers drafted various legislative amendments and tested existing laws in efforts to establish a separate legal hold for a musician's contribution to a specific recorded version of a song. With the stated mission to "curb promiscuous broadcasting" the group entered into its first major court case in 1936 in the Pennsylvania Supreme Court (Authority), with Waring as the chief plaintiff. Waring won the case, receiving an injunction against radio station WDAS in Philadelphia to halt unauthorized play of his records over the air. The injunction, however, was stayed on appeal. When a similar case brought by Paul Whiteman against WNEW in New York was thrown out of the United States Supreme Court in 1940 (Authority), it effectively spelled the end on the performers-rights movement for at least the next decade.

41 Ibid., 103.
43 Ibid.
44 Philip H. Ennis, Seventh Stream, 103.
The failure of the NAPA lawsuits clarified the fact that property rights laws ended for performers (Creator) with the sale of the record. This had numerous consequences for radio. To quote broadcasting historian Erik Barnouw, “The ruling put the disk-jockey for the first time on a secure legal footing.” The ascendance of the deejay in this manner, once again, moved control over programming further from publishers and network heads (Producer). It also meant that radio stations such as WDAS and WNEW could continue to use phonographs as the primary source of musical programming. Other stations, as well, especially smaller independent stations that had already played phonographic music, turned even more toward domestic records as they were able to do so at virtually no cost.

For the production system that developed in the field of independent radio the primary economic unit was no longer a song, but a record. It took longer for this practice to be instituted by network radio, however. One reason for this was the aggressive effort of another musicians’ union, the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) (Union).

Originally, the recording boom was a benefit to musician employment. But by the late 1930s on-air play of domestic phonographs and electrical transcriptions was rightly seen as a potential threat for musicians employed in studio orchestras and radio dance bands (Creators). At this time a strong taboo against the play of domestic phonograph records on network radio was respected. The proscription of recordings was


46 Russell Sanjek and David Sanjek, American Popular Music Business, 51; and Philip H. Ennis, Seventh Stream, 103-04.

47 Ibid., 104.
originally due to the poor sound quality of acoustically recorded records. Even after the advent of higher fidelity electrical recording techniques, most network stations played either live musical performances or electrical transcriptions recorded in-house almost exclusively.

Instead of seeking relief from the courts or from Congress (Authority) as NAPA had, the AFM relied on raw trade union strength, confronting the broadcasters head-on.\textsuperscript{48} The federation used network radio’s dependence on live musicians to its advantage. Wielding the threat of a musicians’ strike, the union pushed through the first contract with NAB in 1938. The deal tightened restrictions on network radio’s use of domestic records but allowed the unlimited use of electrical transcriptions in return for increased spending on staff musicians and employment quotas for union musicians. While this fell short of AFM’s original goal of banning all recorded music from radio, the deal was weighted heavily in the AFM’s favor, going as far as requiring stations to employ union musicians as “platter turners” to change records and to hire standby orchestras who were paid regardless of whether they were actually needed.\textsuperscript{49}

The AFM’s war on recorded music was far more effective than NAPA’s had been. Ironically, due to a clause in the AFM contract that exempted independent stations grossing less than $20,000 annually (both from the employment quotas and the restrictions on the use of phonograph records), the deal would ultimately serve to strengthen further independent radio’s dependence on phonograph music.\textsuperscript{50} This came not only by

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 123-24.

\textsuperscript{49} Russell Sanjek and David Sanjek, American Popular Music Business, 51.

\textsuperscript{50} Philip H. Ennis, Seventh Stream, 104-05.
making phonograph music legal for small independents but also from the fact that the AFM contract effectively increased the cost for radio stations to employ musicians and thus incentivized exempt stations to play records. As a result, the majority of small independent stations turned to recorded music at this time. This shift was initially of little consequence, as the number (162 of the 700 total AM stations operating in the United States in 1937) and market share commanded by such stations was relatively small.\textsuperscript{51} It was not until later in the 1940s during the explosion of independent radio that the full impact of this increasing dependence on recorded music became fully evident.

\textbf{Patent Law: The War of the Speeds}

Struggles over copyright and the low cost of phonographic music continued to drive independent radio stations (Exhibitor) closer to the phonograph industry (Producer) after World War II. Yet until 1948 it was still almost impossible for a small label to achieve a national hit. This was due in large part to the prohibitive cost of distribution for 78-rpm discs, which since the 1930s had been the dominant format for recorded music of all types.\textsuperscript{52} Made of shellac, 78s were bulky and heavy. Furthermore, they were extremely delicate, and the great amount of care involved in transporting the discs led to a cost of distribution that was beyond what most small labels could afford. This confined access to national distribution to major labels, all of which had the benefit of national

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} \textit{Ibid}.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Richard A. Peterson, “Why 55?,” \textit{Popular Music}, 101.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
distribution systems (Distributor) dedicated specifically to transport of their own records.\textsuperscript{53}

In 1948 two new record formats were introduced: the 12-inch 33 1/3-rpm LP (long-playing) record and the 7-inch 45-rpm single. These quickly replaced the 78-rpm record as the dominant consumer formats and, in the process, removed major logistical and financial barriers to national distribution. Unlike 78s, both of the new record formats were made of vinyl. Besides being smaller and lighter than shellac discs (relative to playback time), the vinyl discs were practically unbreakable. The increased durability of 33 1/3s and 45s drastically lowered the cost of record distribution. As a result, a number of small independent distribution companies (Distributor) sprang up.\textsuperscript{54} Known as “one-stops,” these distributors were geared specifically toward servicing independent labels and provided distribution to both retail and promotional outlets.\textsuperscript{55} With this service the one-stops formed a vital link in forming a growing informal network among independent record labels (Producer), record stores, jukebox operators, and radio stations (Exhibitors) across the country. With this network well-established by the mid-1950s it became possible for even a small independent label to enjoy access to the national record market.

Of the two new record formats the 45-rpm single was the most important for the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll. Its introduction in the fall of 1948 resulted primarily from patent law struggles between two major record companies, Columbia and RCA (Producers). Since the 1930s a number of disc manufacturers had patented improvements

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

over the 78, but due to economic depression it was judged that consumers (Public) would not buy new players to accommodate new playback formats.\textsuperscript{56} Improved record designs lay fallow until after World War II, when Columbia, after experimenting with disc material, the distance between the grooves, and the size of the record, introduced the 12-inch 33 1/3 rpm LP record in 1948.\textsuperscript{57} The slower playback speed and the finer grooves of the LP allowed twenty-three minutes of playing time per side as opposed to the 78’s five minutes. At the LP’s public unveiling, company heads touted both the superior playback quality of thermally engraved vinyl discs as well as the fact that the fifteen-inch stack of LPs featured in a promotional display contained as much music as the eight-foot-high stack of 78s placed next to it.\textsuperscript{58} Columbia’s parent company, CBS, offered to share its design to establish an industry-wide standard, but RCA, seeing this as a play to dominate the market, refused the offer. Instead, RCA released its own competing record format and playback system—the 7-inch 45-rpm with the larger center hole—just six months later. The move sparked a string of court battles between Columbia and CBS over whose design would become the new consumer standard. Dubbed by the press as “the War of the Speeds,” the clash between these two record companies played out quite publicly until 1950 when, after government mediation (Authority), RCA and Columbia agreed to pool their patents and produce records in both new formats.\textsuperscript{59}


\textsuperscript{58} David Morton, \textit{Sound Recording}, 138.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Ibid.}, 139.
Ironically, the only real loser in the War of the Speeds was the 78. The introduction of the 45 and the 33 1/3 in such quick succession initially bewildered the record buying public. But set manufacturers relatively easily engineered machines capable of accommodating both of the new formats, along with the older 78s. As the popularity of the vinyl records increased, 78s gradually fell out of production. The overall record market expanded and split into two tiers reflecting the intended markets of the two emerging formats. The 45-rpm single became the preferred medium for white pop, black rhythm and blues, and white country music. In this “lower” tier, both the records and the receivers were intentionally kept cheap and directed specifically toward young music listeners who could neither afford nor cared about the higher sound quality of the more expensive upper-end sets. The “upper” tier formed around LP players and records. Promoted as an upscale product, these were directed towards adult record buyers and the burgeoning “hi-fi” market. The LP most often served as a recorded medium for music such as Broadway musicals, movie scores, “mood music,” classical, and jazz pieces that exceeded the sonic quality and playback time of either the 78 or the 45. This contributed to overall market expansion, but hi-fi did not translate over AM radio. With FM radio still in its infancy, no accepted format yet existed for the LP apart from the home phonograph player. As a result, promotion for LPs was limited mostly to point-of-purchase displays and occasional advertisements in newspapers and magazines (Exhibitors). AM radio programmers identified a singles-oriented market base, and radio stations and juke-

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61 David Morton, *Sound Recording*, 139.


box operators (Exhibitors) all preferred the smaller one-song discs for ease of use. This made the 45 the most popular form of phonographic music on-air.64

Unlike prior episodes of disagreement between the record and radio industries, record labels in the 45-oriented singles market had no objection to on-air play of their records. Radio play (Exhibitor) was the most effective way for independent labels (Producer) to promote their products to a large audience (Public). Jukebox operators (Exhibitor) accounted for a good portion of overall record sales, but the jukebox did not provide the targeted and repeated play it took for a record label to consistently make a hit.65 This was left to radio.

In the new arrangement the combination of record company (Producer) and deejay (Exhibitor) replaced the traditional hit-making team of publisher (Producer) and song plugger (Exhibitor).66 Surveys from the time show that radio play was responsible for 85 percent of total record sales.67 Record companies (Producer), especially small independents, routinely cut deals with local stations (Exhibitor), giving free boxes of records, placing deejays on their payroll, and paying royalties to stations for sales in the broadcast area in return for the promotion that radio play provided.68 Through their contacts with record distributors, jukebox operators, and deejays, labels kept close tabs on which releases were or were not selling among particular demographics and adjusted their output accordingly. The result was a new “hit parade” format led by the radio deejay (Exhibitor)

64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 102.
66 Ibid., 158.
67 Ibid., 106.
that was quick-moving and more responsive to audience tastes than that of the upper tier LP market. The hit parade picked up speed, and by the early 1950s around two hundred popular singles were being released every week (although few reached the charts). 69

Importantly, the hit parade at this time became more and more geared toward local and regional audiences instead of the national public taste of network radio. The shift was reflected in changes in programming philosophies, one of which was the extensive play of black records on independent stations. Despite the prevailing racism of the social and political climate, black radio formats took hold early on in the South. Changes in programming were dictated not only by shifting demand but also in response to fundamental changes in market structure in the broadcast industry following the introduction of television. In the next section, I examine the impact of these structural transformations focusing specifically on the role of changing FCC regulations.

FCC Deregulation: The independents take over

The period between 1945 and 1952 encompassed the most dramatic period of expansion of American broadcasting since the birth of the industry. Growth was propelled by multiple factors: increasing postwar prosperity, the release of pent-up capital from lifting artificial wartime freezes on set production, the introduction of the new technologies of FM radio and television, and the explosive growth of AM radio, which outstripped all other sectors. 70 Demand in the AM market had, in fact, been growing steadily since the 1930s with the average number of sets per household increasing by

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69 Philip H. Ennis, The Seventh Stream, 139-40.

70 Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kintross, Stay Tuned, 275.
about ten percent annually and the yearly radio advertising budget growing by over 300 percent from $157 million in 1940 to $492 million in 1955. 71 Hundreds of new potential station operators applied for broadcasting licenses during this time, but few were granted. This was due to tight FCC regulations (Authority) on commercial broadcasting that restricted most markets to around five stations. Usually these were the four national networks—CBS, Mutual, and NBC Red and Blue—along with one independent. 72 The arrangement gave an obvious competitive advantage to the network broadcasters (Pressure Group) who lobbied hard to keep this regulatory structure in place. In 1947 their stance changed abruptly, however. The new position happened as the networks occupied Illustration 3-1. Growth of AM Radio, 1942-1951. 73

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with transferring their most popular programming to television abandoned their opposition to FCC licensing of new AM stations. With this, the backlog of license applications was quickly approved along with many new applicants as well. Within a few years the number of stations in most markets had doubled.\(^\text{74}\) Illustration 3.1. demonstrates the changes in the number of small independents, small network affiliates, large independents, and large network affiliates from 1942 to 1951.

The influx of new stations brought with it fundamental transformations to the market structure of AM radio. Before television a relatively small and stable number of owners had dominated the industry, the largest part being major newspaper organizations. The new crop of station owners was more diverse: an array of independent entrepreneurs ranging from shrewd businessmen to ex-GIs with wartime radio training but with no previous experience in commercial broadcasting. The increase in diversity of station ownership translated into an increased variety of operational practices, goals, and strategies employed within the radio industry.\(^\text{75}\) The spike in new stations brought about a geographical reorientation of the radio market as well. When the FCC (Authority) loosened limits on licensing, the greater number of stations operating in each market required tighter restrictions on transmitter power. While the average broadcasting range of stations had been increasing steadily since the 1920s, with most stations being clear-channel designated (\textit{i.e.}, on air twenty-four hours a day), the new government regulations reversed this trend. To protect existing stations from radio interference the FCC limited most of the new stations to low-powered or directional transmitters. By 1950 nearly one-

\(^{74}\) \textit{Ibid.}

\(^{75}\) Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross, \textit{Stay Tuned}. 282.
third of all stations were restricted to daytime-only hours, up from ten percent during the War. As a result, the average market reached by a station shrunk by half from the previous high of 60,000 sets to 30,000 by 1948.

Whereas the networks had concentrated on large and medium-sized cities, many of the new independent stations were located in suburbs and rural communities. By the early 1950s nearly every market was served by its own locally owned and operated station. The importance of network affiliation (Producer), once almost a requirement for commercial success, declined. In 1940 network advertising had accounted for 46 percent of total sales. By 1956 this had fallen to 9 percent, while the portion of local advertising revenues had climbed from 29 to 61 percent.

With a larger number of stations competing for listeners in what was, on average, a smaller market size, the “mass” audience model of the national radio networks gave way to a differentiated market concept. Deejays and station managers for independent stations (Exhibitor), working closely with advertisers (Patron) and record companies (Producer), developed formats intended to appeal to specific regional, ethnic, and cultural submarkets. Although black musical programming was still mostly prohibited on network radio, more and more independent stations began experimenting with it. As it became apparent that with proper programming black audiences (Public) could be reached in a way mutually profitable for advertisers (Patron), broadcasters (Exhibitor), and record companies (Producer), the presence of black music on independent radio grew rapidly.

76 Ibid., 276.
78 Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross, Stay Tuned, 282.
The first all-black programmed and staffed station in the country went on the air in 1949 when the 250-watt daytime independent, WDIA, in Memphis switched to programming black music exclusively. Originally founded as a hillbilly / country station, WDIA became far more popular after instituting the new format. By 1954 it had upped its power to 50,000 watts reaching throughout the mid-South. Surprisingly, audience surveys show that the change had not alienated whites but had instead grown white and black listenership alike. 80

The popularity of black programming among whites was not isolated to WDIA in Memphis. Another survey by Atlanta’s black-formatted WERD, for example, shows whites made up around twenty percent of the station’s total listenership. 81 To recall the words of Sam Phillips, “There was still a lot of hatred between the races in the South, but music was the one area where black and white were closer than people realized. The young whites loved the black music they got to hear.” 82 In the next section I examine the role of independent radio in popularizing black records among young white audiences, while also considering ways that new modes of consumption and production for popular music circumvented prevailing racist legal and social codes in the Jim Crow South.

80 Ibid., 174.


Black Radio, White Audience

By 1955 260 stations incorporated segments aimed at black audiences and twenty-eight stations broadcasted all-black formats. Most of these were located in the South in areas with a substantial black population. Many relied heavily on rhythm and blues records and employed an all-black staff and on-air personalities.

Prior to this, network dominance had severely limited the presence of blacks on the radio, not only in terms of airtime given to black programming, but also in the manner in which blacks were to be portrayed on-air. Ennis, in *The Seventh Stream* illustrated the prewar network position toward blacks on radio, pointing to an excerpt from a 1943 issue of *Billboard*:

> For years it has been, and still is a rule in radio that Negro artists may not be introduced on any commercial network with the appellation of Mr., Mrs., or Miss preceding his or her name. . . . Radio still has a rule that a Negro cannot be represented in any drama except in the role of servant or as an ignorant or comical person. Also the role of the Negro in the American war effort cannot be mentioned in a sponsored program. Despite this, Negroes have made progress on the radio. Golden Gate Quartet had a CBS sustaining for two years and is now on the Amos & Andy sponsored show. Teddy Wilson was on Duffy’s Tavern earlier this year. John Kirby’s band had a CBS sustaining a couple of years ago—Hazel Scott, the Boogie Boys and other Café Society performers have guested on many network and local programs. . . . Negroes have begun to land jobs on radio house bands thanks mostly to John Hammond’s persuasions.

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As Ennis also pointed out, this excerpt demonstrates that networks imposed restrictive policies toward blacks primarily due to pressure from sponsors (Patron), even if insiders, John Hammond (Producer) in this case, tried to bring blacks (Creators) into more prominent positions. Secondly, the type of black programming allowed on network radio, musical and otherwise, was circumscribed to that which fit into established white mainstream sensibilities.

The networks’ (Producer) confinement of blacks (Creator) to ignorant, comical, or servant roles (e.g., Amos & Andy) can be seen as a form of “labeled interaction,” where actions of members of an oppressed group are required to fit within strict behavioral patterns dictated by the class or racial group in power. Kloosterman and Quispel recognized such patterns in the relationship of some white Southerners with the black nannies who raised them:

Many of them cherished very warm memories of those women, and felt that, on that basis they could generally be said to be favourably inclined towards blacks. However, in actual fact the role of black nanny was imposed on her. In no way could a black nanny, in this system of “labelled interaction,” break away from discrimination against blacks.

Labeled interactions enforcing the pejorative roles prescribed for black talent by network sponsors or those placed on black nannies, were part of broader patterns of systematic discrimination. These were embodied in the racist Jim Crow laws that governed nearly every aspect of everyday life for Southern blacks.

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86 Ibid.

Jim Crow was formally enacted in Southern states in 1898 in the wake of the Supreme Court (Authority) decision in the case, *Plessy versus Ferguson*. This court ruling established the constitutionality of racial segregation under the legal umbrella of “separate but equal” status of blacks and whites. Through, in Stephen Berrey’s words, a complex combination of “new laws, old customs, and physical construction,” Jim Crow essentially institutionalized racist attitudes and customs carried over from the days of slavery.88 Southern states and cities put in place laws and statutes that strictly segregated all public facilities from railways, schools, restrooms, government buildings, prisons, churches, housing, and cemeteries, to beaches, parks, motels, and restaurants. While separate, facilities were rarely equal; in virtually all cases designated black facilities were vastly inferior.

Jim Crow, in this physical respect, as well as in its social and economic manifestations, was designed to cast blacks as a subhuman class in order to maintain political and cultural control over the black population.89 Despite segregation of public facilities close contact between the races was a common part of everyday life in the South, even more so than in the North where separate neighborhoods made contacts between blacks and whites rarer.90 In nearly all instances, however, interactions between blacks and whites were bound by strict codes of social etiquette. Jim Crow’s customs and codes forbade any gesture that suggested equal social standing for black citizens and required blacks to show deference to whites in all interactions. This often was acted out in quite


physical ways. A black man walking down the sidewalk, for instance, was expected to step aside and remove his hat when passing a white. Blacks entering a white home were not allowed to use the front door. They were to refrain from shaking hands, dining, or riding in the front seat of an automobile with whites, and were not to call a white by his or her first name. Blacks were expected to know their economic place as well and to stay well within it. Confined to “black jobs,” they were expected to occupy low-paying menial occupations, and any gestures of upward mobility—from land ownership, wearing expensive clothes, the use of proper grammar—were considered affronts to whites. Most frantically monitored and controlled were sexual interactions between whites and blacks, especially those of black men with white women. With even the slightest suggestion of intimacy, such as lighting a cigarette for a white woman, a black man could visit violent retribution not only on himself but on the entire black community.  

Thus, breaking of the law *de jure* was not the only infraction subject to punishment. Violating customs or social codes was equally as dangerous. Retribution ranged from property destruction to physical violence. The most extreme form of physical retribution against blacks took the form of lynching. Unlike with Nazi Germany, or Apartheid South Africa, racial violence was not sanctioned by the state directly, but instead, indirectly, in the state’s refusal to punish white violence against blacks. Lynching regularly took place in public and were sometimes even announced beforehand by newspapers as a local event. It was often whites from the lower classes who carried out the lynchings.  

As whites made up the entirety of the formal legal and judicial systems,

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from the police through the judges (Authority), it ensured that black victims had little recourse against white violence, legal or otherwise.

Whites were bound by Jim Crow’s racial restrictions as well. Punishment for whites was generally lighter than that for blacks, but whites violating racial codes and customs could also face severe consequences. An oft-cited example of this comes from Yale psychologist and self-acknowledged “Yankee” John Dollard. In 1934 when researching his book *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937), Dollard spent several months interviewing and observing interactions of local whites and blacks in the Mississippi Delta town of Indianola, Mississippi. Unwittingly, Dollard violated racial etiquette when, in his words, “A Negro friend came to (the) boarding house and knocked on the front door” (emphasis original). The action, according to Dollard created “a crisis for him, for the family, and for me.”

In another instance, after news circulated that Dollard had attended a festivity in the black community, local whites treated him with open hostility. That he was there for research purposes mitigated repercussions somewhat. It was common for whites such as Dollard who were viewed as being too “friendly” in their interactions with blacks to be ostracized by the white community in this manner. But more serious breaches of racial codes such as testifying in court against a white on behalf of a black or encouraging black resistance could bring severe physical danger to whites as well as blacks.

As Kloosterman and Quispel have recognized, instituting and maintaining a racially oppressive political / social system such as Jim Crow requires three conditions:

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(1) stigmatization of the oppressed group, (2) a large social distance between oppressed and oppressor, making it impossible for stigmas to be corrected through close personal contact, and (3) some sanction on people to become discriminants where well-meaning members of the oppressive class or race are violently forced to the pattern of discrimination (i.e., terrorization). In response to Northern critics of segregation, Southern whites often pointed to their closer and more frequent contacts with blacks. But all interactions, even the most personal and intimate, such as the quasi-familial relationship between white children and black nannies, fell squarely within the pattern of labeled interactions. Such labeled interactions, violently enforced (i.e., terrorization) served to give whites and blacks only limited and biased knowledge of one another. Interactions of this nature, rather than breaking down discriminatory attitudes (i.e., stigmatization) served instead to reinforce them (i.e., social distance) and to pass them down to subsequent generations.

In any consideration of the political and social climate of the South in the late 1940s and early 1950s there is little to suggest that any of these three components of operative racism were weakening to any meaningful extent in the political or social realms. The end of legal segregation was still more than a decade away. The social distance between whites and blacks was as wide as ever. Discriminatory attitudes among whites prevailed in the South, and racial violence against blacks was commonplace. But as Jim Crow (Authority) was keeping whites and blacks separate in most aspects of everyday life, changes in the production system of independent radio (Exhibitor) were

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95 Ibid., 152.
96 Ibid., 155.
97 Ibid.
bringing them closer together, and the popularity of black music among young whites grew as a result.

The popularity of black music among whites was, of course, not new. This was true at times even among the most virulent racists. The scale on which this change took hold in the South at this time was remarkable, nonetheless. Despite the discriminatory racial climate, the increased buying power of black audiences (Public) after the war was an economic fact. Industrialization, historically low unemployment during the Korean War, and higher pay attending urbanization gave a major boost in the disposable income of the black population. With this, the ability to reach black markets became the calling card for independent stations (Exhibitor). A pitch from St. Louis’s WXLW read, “Serving and selling 328,000 Negroes in the St. Louis area since 1947”; WOKJ in Jackson, Mississippi boasted “The ONLY way to the 107,000 Negroes”; and the sales staff of WDIA in Memphis made it clear that at 50,000 watts they reached 10 percent of the entire black population in the United States (1,237,686 people) and 40 percent of the entire radio market in the Mid-South.98

Station owners discovered that the most effective and profitable way to reach black audiences (Public)—virtually all stations were still white-owned—was to turn programming over to black deejays (Exhibitor) who were closely tuned in to the tastes—musical and otherwise—of black communities. An excerpt from a 1947 issue of Ebony noted the effect this familiarity had on the ascendance of the black deejay:

Most of the sepia spielers who operate on twenty-one stations from coast to coast are relative neophytes, catching the crest of a boom that has skyrocketed the chatter chaps to a new peak. . . . Hired in recent months be-

cause they’re good business, colored jockeys have been catching on fast, drawing flocks of fan mail and getting better sponsors. They have been as popular as the records they play—and no small number are by Negro artists.99

Securing a popular deejay (Exhibitor) was the key for sponsors (Patron)—black or white—in reaching the black audience (Public). At a time when network policies still prohibited it, the hiring of black deejays became common practice for independent stations. If a deejay was effective at reaching the audience, sponsors (even some national sponsors that had formerly enforced strict “lily-white” policies for network radio) gave them relatively free rein regarding programming choices and on-air conduct.

Early black deejays employed an array of successful strategies to reach their intended audiences. On one end of the spectrum was influential Chicago deejay Jack Cooper. Appealing to the tastes of the urban black bourgeoisie, Cooper adopted the diction and demeanor of his white counterparts and leaned toward conservative musical selections. Cooper, and other deejays of his ilk were, at times, so convincingly “white” that, according to the aforementioned Ebony article, some occasionally “received anti-Negro notes assuming them to be white.”100 On the opposite end of the spectrum was another Chicago deejay, Al Benson. Unlike Cooper’s smooth, polished delivery, Benson’s violated most established norms of on-air presentation. His idiosyncratic “jive-talking” and, to quote one black publication from the 1950s, his “distressing grappling with words over two syllables,” was the object of ridicule for many throughout the


100 Ibid.
Regardless, his ability to reach black audiences was undeniable. At the height of his popularity, Benson hosted five radio shows per week and earned $100,000 per year. The “black everyman” style of on-air conduct that he developed and the locally popular rhythm and blues records he played resonated with black audiences and with young whites as well.  

Benson was also highly influential on an upcoming crop of young deejays after World War II. One younger black deejay in Milwaukee, Eddie O’Jay, recounted his early impressions of Benson:

He killed the King’s English and I don’t know if he did it on purpose or not. Everybody had to see Al if they wanted to sell to the black market in Chicago, whether it was beer or rugs or Nu Nile hair cream. . . . He wasn’t pretending to be white. He sounded black. They knew he was and most of us were proud of the fact “Here’s a black voice coming out of the radio and we know it’s him.”

As with his popularity with audiences, Benson’s influence on other deejays also transcended racial barriers. It was Benson who served as the prototype for the “personality deejay.” This model was adopted by other black rhythm and blues deejays across the country such as O’Jay, as well as white crossover deejays like Alan Freed, Wolfman Jack, and Dewey Phillips who imitated Benson’s “jive talk” and also relied heavily on rhythm and blues records for programming.

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101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.; and Juan González and Joseph Torres, News for All the People, 284.

103 Eddie O’Jay, quoted in Nelson George, Death of Rhythm and Blues, 41.

104 Ibid., 41-42.
Pointing out the economic origins for the rise of the black deejay is not to downplay the vital social and cultural roles that deejays and black radio played in the black community. It is instead only to stress the fact that unlike with network radio, the type of black programming formulated by Benson and his contemporaries was explicitly by blacks and for blacks. As such it was not subject to the patterns of labeled interaction that governed blacks on network radio and elsewhere in society. It is also worth noting that, as with the previous anti-black policies in network radio, the growing prominence of this new type of black-oriented programming was dictated in large part by the influence of sponsors (Patron).

The by-blacks-for-blacks model adopted by independent radio had been employed in the race records industry for nearly two decades. But due to the technological configuration of broadcasting, radio was not as easily segregated as the record industry or live entertainment districts were. According to cultural sociologist, Iain Chambers:

By the early 1950s, if you lived in a large US city, whether Memphis or Chicago, you could flip your radio dial and there would be a good chance of finding the blues and R&B coming from some station. . . . No longer so easily ghettoized in the separate market of “race records,” or restricted to the selected world of jazz “cognoscenti,” black American music began bypassing some of the bleaching processes of the popular music industry and finding new ears.

Since the beginning of the race and hillbilly industry record, distribution patterns had been implemented by-and-large to fit broader patterns of urban segregation in order to

105 Deejays were well respected in the black community not only as entertainers but as community leaders and organizers. In Chicago Cooper founded a mobile news unit devoted specifically to the black community, and Benson was active in promoting civil rights efforts during the 1950s and 1960s (see William Barlow, Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio (Temple: Temple University Press, 1999), 50-58; and Allmusic, “Al Benson,” Allmusic: posted online (www.allmusic.com/artist/al-benson-mn0000612275).

increase marketing and distribution efficiency. This type of *de facto* segregation was in place in northern cities as well as in the South. An illustrative example can be found in a Decca race-record shop (Producer / Exhibitor) located on the border of Chicago’s black ghetto in the 1920s. For white record buyers, the store, to quote Barnouw, represented “an out post [sic] on a mysterious, perhaps dangerous, frontier.”\(^{107}\) The potential of physical danger, be it real or imagined, or the risk of white terrorization involved in the journey to a place such as the local race record shop, was undoubtedly enough to deter many whites, especially younger ones from making the trip. Similar risks were taken by a young white going to a black nightclub or jukejoint. Radio (Exhibitor), on the other hand, brought the music directly into the home, thereby bypassing physical barriers of segregation, as well as the possibility of outside terrorization.

In the home, terrorization was still a possibility, but this was most likely to be limited to that of the parental unit. Such parental disapproval for young white listeners of black radio was certainly commonplace. Elvis recalled his own parents’ disapproval of his listening to black blues radio programs: “They would scold me at home for listening to them, ‘Sinful music’ the towns folk in Memphis said it was. Which never bothered me, I guess.”\(^{108}\) In the days when multiple radio ownership was rare for most families and radio listening was done through large, unwieldy tube radios, parental disapproval may have easily squelched the young listener’s (Public) ability to tune in to black programming. But with the increasing availability of cheap, portable, transistor radios, 


during the 1950s radio listening increasingly moved beyond parentally-controlled domestic spaces like the living room or family room and into private spaces such as the bedroom. It moved outside of the home as well. Radio listening became a common accompaniment to an array of other youth work and leisure activities: at parties, at school, at the beach, and, in the way most celebrated in the iconography of rock ‘n’ roll, in the automobile.\(^{109}\)

The increased portability of transistor devices resulted to increased cultural mobility. Black radio (Exhibitor) for the first time provided a mass-media form that was not subject to labeled interactions and was readily accessible to young whites (Public). The increasing importance of radio listening in post-war youth culture in conjunction with the exposure that black radio provided for black records drove a larger process of desegregation in the popular music field. This happened as more young white fans (Public) of black radio began buying black records and, in some cases, even attending live performances of black soloists and ensembles. Considering the significant early presence of stations like WDIA (Exhibitor), it is not surprising that Memphis became one of the first places in the country where this desegregation appeared on a considerable scale. As Robert Palmer in his book *Deep Blues* commented on changing musical tastes of young white Memphians:

> A massive shift was taking place in the listening habits of young white Americans, and the shift was felt very early in and around Memphis. Whites in the area had been hiring black entertainers for their school dances, country club parties, plantation cookouts, and other festivities, and by the beginning of the fifties most of the jukeboxes in recreation parlors, soda fountains, swimming pool club rooms, and other spots frequented by

white teenagers were stocked almost exclusively with records by black artists.  

Starting in places like Memphis, the popularity of black rhythm and blues spread among young whites throughout the country.

For certain, the change in listening habits did not mean the end of operative racism. Tastes in music and fashion are by nature fickle and change quickly, while attitudes as deeply embedded as racism was in the South tend to change slowly over multiple generations. Even so, the wide popularity of black records and radio with white audiences was a remarkable departure from race relations in the Jim Crow South. For many young Southern whites like Elvis (Public) radio and records gave them a chance to experience black culture apart from labeled interactions, which otherwise prevailed. The common interest in rhythm and blues music among young whites and blacks helped to weaken the maintenance of social distance between races through creating a virtual shared space based on broadcast and recorded music that was free from the terrorization, which elsewhere reinforced racial stigmatization against blacks. With the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll the desegregation of musical tastes that began with independent radio and records would begin to play out in more tangible ways as well. This happened as rock ‘n’ roll concerts increasingly brought white and black audiences together under the same roof, well before actual legal desegregation was a reality in the Jim Crow South.

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Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate the overarching role of law and regulation in the rise of independent records and radio. The ascendance of the independents represented a major power shift within the popular music industry. Oligopolistic control of national networks, labels, and publishers dissolved after World War II, giving independent radio stations control of their own programming content and granting independent record companies’ access to national audiences for the first time. I have analyzed this industry transformation by considering the role of legal and regulatory factors in changing relationships of resource interdependence in the popular music industry. Some shifts in resource interdependence came from structural transformations in the popular music industry and market. Struggles over control of limited industry resources, and the power thereby granted, were, in other cases, a direct driver of industry transformations shaping key relationships and practices that defined the pop culture moment.

ASCAP’s (Producer) control over the popular music catalogue had confined radio to a middle-of-the-road white-pop aesthetic during the 1930s and early 1940s. The creation of BMI (Producer) broke this control, and in the process brought a variety of ethnic and regional musical styles that ASCAP had actively excluded into network radio programming. At the same time, ties between the previously hostile camps of the recording (Producer) and broadcasting (Exhibitor) industries were strengthened. These ties formed on the basis of a mutually beneficial relationship where phonograph music provided the cheapest and most popular form of programming for small independent broadcasters (Exhibitor) while radio provided the most effective way for independent labels (Producer) to reach their intended audiences (Public). When major networks abandoned radio
to pursue television in 1947, major changes to FCC regulation (Authority) restructured the broadcasting industry. The number of radio stations increased drastically while the average market reached per-station shrunk by half. In the new market structure the ability to reach ethnic and cultural niche markets became the key to profitability. Black deejays (Exhibitor) were commonly given control over programming content by sponsors (Patron) and station owners (Producer) because it was “good business.” This led to the increasing presence of black programming on independent radio. Unlike the programming on network radio, independent radio instituted formats conceived by black creators (Creator) specifically for black audiences (Public). Besides attracting black audiences, black radio found popularity with young whites as well, a shift that took hold early on in the South. In doing so, black music—first in broadcast form and later in phonographic and live forms—served as an instrument for broader social changes by providing a mass media format that bypassed racial segregation, both in its physical manifestations as well as in its social forms of labeled interactions. The growing popularity of black radio among young whites and blacks by the 1950s reached the point where network programmers (Producer) and sponsors (Patron), who had previously excluded blacks from mainstream radio, began to follow the independents’ lead by incorporating black and black-inspired programming into network formats. In this manner, independent radio and records led the way for the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll.

Employing the resource interdependence model as my primary frame of analysis, my main objective has been to view the above-cited historical developments in a way that sheds light on issues surrounding the central questions posed in the introduction of this study. I have done this by examining power relationships to expose structures and
mechanisms that maintained separation between black and white musical traditions, by demonstrating processes and channels that facilitated black / white stylistic interchange, and by offering reasons why this interchange occurred early on in the South when racial segregation was still the law of the land. More broadly, I argue that viewing the rise of the independents from the perspective of resource interdependence has also illustrated how the complex interplay of legal, economic, political, and social factors shapes aesthetic and cultural transformations in mass media systems, both by constraining cultural activities and by compelling the creation of new ones.
INDUSTRY AND ORGANIZATION STRUCTURE:
EFFECTS OF MARKET CONCENTRATION ON
MUSICAL DIVERSITY AND INNOVATION

The influx of newly competitive independents in the post-World War II recording industry momentarily broke the dominance of the major-label oligopoly that had controlled the national popular music market since the 1930s. This transformation of the competitive environment happened during the mid-1950s as a burst of labels and performers from specialty recording fields moved from the fringes of the mainstream industry to a dominant position in the market, eventually taking over the popular charts during the national explosion of rock ‘n’ roll. In this chapter I highlight structural and organizational aspects of this shift, examining the relationship of industry concentration and centralization with innovation and diversity of mainstream popular music programming.

Product Diversity

Historically, the commercial music industry has been characterized by a highly competitive and notoriously unpredictable market. While for popular music, novelty (or the appearance of such) has been the commercial lifeblood of the industry, products offered on the market are ultimately chosen on the basis of profit potential. On the de-

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mand side, diversity in the market may be seen as preferable to homogeneity, be it on political, social, or aesthetic grounds. On the supply side, however, pursuing innovation and/or expanding the range of products can create production inefficiencies, increase costs, and incur more risk and uncertainty than proven sellers. Thus is the tradeoff between production efficiency and predictability, on one hand, and innovation and diversity, on the other.

Due to the finite nature of industry resources (e.g., airtime, shelf space) and the massive financial and material inputs required for national and global distribution/promotion, the decision to present one product or message may necessitate the suppression of others. As a result, only a small fraction of the total creative output on the supply side ever reaches the mass market. This apparent contradiction between the diversity of cultural output on the supply side versus that offered on the mass market has been central in the broader debate over the relationship between “culture” and “industry.” This debate traces back to the Frankfurt School and has subsequently been taken up in studies from diverse fields ranging from economics, cultural studies, to hegemony. In these studies

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6 For the Frankfurt School critique, see Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Allen Lane, 1973); for economic perspective, see Joseph Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy (New York: Harper, 1942); for a cultural studies perspective, see Richard Peterson and
effects of scale have been a prominent issue. More specifically, the relationship of
industry concentration—i.e., the degree to which a small number of firms dominate the
market—to homogenization and standardization of cultural products has been a focus for
analysis.

Despite the prominence of the issue in a wide variety of disciplines, the actual
mechanisms and the degree to which concentration impacts market diversity have been
contested. Within the production of culture perspective two competing accounts have
emerged out of attempts to explain the relationship between industry concentration and
product diversity in commercial popular music during the second half of the twentieth
century. First was the “cyclical,” or “closed” account originating in Peterson and
Berger’s 1975 article “Cycles in Symbol Production.”7 In this article the authors pro-
posed a negative correlation between market concentration and product diversity. They
contended that periods of high innovation and product diversity happen during short
bursts of low market concentration when competition from innovative small firms forces
large firms to diversify their product lines. These brief periods of competition, in turn,
are followed by long periods of gradually increasing concentration and lowered diversity
as oligopolists regain market control. Subsequent studies of diversity in popular music,
as well as in film and television, and the news media, produced findings similar to Peter-

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7 See Richard Peterson and David Berger, “Cycles in Symbol Production: The Case of Popular Music,”
son’s and Berger’s, also showing a negative correlation between corporate concentration and diversity of cultural products. The second “open system” account came from critics of the cyclical model out of attempts to explain continued diversity in mainstream popular music programming during increasing market concentration from the 1970s through the 1990s. Using “Cycles” as a point of departure, proponents of the open system model emphasized the role of internal structures of organizations in shaping levels of diversity and argued that the negative correlation between concentration and product diversity is mitigated and eventually eliminated when decentralized modes of production prevail.

In this chapter, after outlining major structural components of the postwar popular music industry, I compare cyclical and open accounts of the effects of concentration on diversity of programming in the American mainstream popular music market. I focus on

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changing organizational strategies instituted by major labels in response to high market turbulence and increased competition from small independents during the mid-1950s rock ‘n’ roll explosion. Along this line, I contend that key events in the early history of rock ‘n’ roll, such as Elvis’s move from Sun to RCA in 1955, were indicative of the emergence of what Timothy Dowd termed a “decentralized logic of production” and a broad industry move from a closed system of production during the 1930s and 1940s to an open system of production during the second half of the twentieth century. 10 I identify this transformation as a fundamental organizational component of the pop culture moment and a key driver for continued diversity in the mainstream popular music market in the post-rock ‘n’ roll era.

Postwar Industry Structure

Three main structural elements frame competitive activities within a given industry. The first is the degree of oligopoly. This is the extent to which a few firms are able to control the amount, price, and type of products offered on the market. The second element, vertical integration, is the amount of control that a firm exercises throughout the production process from raw material to public dissemination. The third element, horizontal integration, is the degree to which firms are logistically or financially linked to other industries. In practice, these elements are often correspondent although it is also possible for them to fluctuate independently. 11


The degree of oligopoly in an industry may vary from one extreme of a monopoly, in which a single firm exercises complete control over price, quantity, and product type (i.e., total market concentration) to the other extreme of perfect competition, in which none of these factors are significantly influenced by any one firm (i.e., no market concentration). An industry may also be structured so that both oligopolistic and competitive conditions exist side by side. In this situation a few large firms at the core of an industry interact like an oligopoly while a large number of small firms compete on the periphery by catering to niche markets not accommodated by the oligopolists.¹²

Such a dual industry structure arose in the popular music recording industry during the first half of the twentieth century, forming around two divergent markets. The first of these was the mainstream popular music market. Since the 1930s this market had been dominated almost entirely by three firms—RCA, Columbia, and Decca. These companies competed with one another for share of the overall national audience and essentially mirrored one another’s most popular programs, which invariably were directed toward an urban, middle-class, white adult musical aesthetic.¹³ On the fringe of the mainstream was a second “specialty” market. Formed originally during the 1920s, this market was targeted toward a varied collection of smaller, culturally and ethnically distinct audiences. Over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, this market split internally

¹² Ibid.
¹³ Ibid.
into two tiers with one tier—the "race" industry—directed toward urban and rural blacks, and the other—the "hillbilly" industry—directed toward rural whites.\textsuperscript{14}

Declining record sales during the Depression nearly decimated the specialty record industry, but by the late 1940s the market had rebounded. Encouraged by postwar economic prosperity, market expansion in the race and hillbilly markets, and lowered financial and logistical barriers, a flood of small independent labels entered the specialty market and competition rose sharply. Competition within the mainstream market was high as well, although the conditions within this market differed drastically from those of the specialty industry.

As the number of competitors in the specialty field exploded, concentration in the mainstream market reached all-time historical highs. Inspection of the four- and eight-firm concentration ratios (\textit{i.e.}, the number of annual hits released by the top four and eight firms, respectively) for 1949 shows that the top four firms—RCA, Columbia, Decca, and Capitol—accounted for 89\% of the sixty-three total releases in the \textit{Billboard} Weekly Top 10 Chart, while the top eight accounted for 100\% (see Table 4.1, columns 4 and 5).\textsuperscript{15} Comparing these concentration ratios with those commonly found in other industries during the same period suggests that such concentration was extreme. According to a United States government survey of 416 manufacturing industries, only 11.3\% had four-firm concentration ratios above 60\% while only 6.5\% had four-firm concen-

\textsuperscript{14} Multiple factors contributed to the widening split between white and black popular music in the first half of the twentieth century. For further analysis of the role of the recording industry in this split see the previous chapter in the current study on technology, 60-65.

\textsuperscript{15} Richard Peterson, "Why 55?," \textit{Popular Music}, 104.
Table 4.1. Number of Firms and Market Shares in the *Billboard* Weekly Top Ten of the Popular Music Single Record Market by Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Labels</th>
<th>Firms</th>
<th>Firms with Only One Hit</th>
<th>Four-Firm Concentration</th>
<th>Eight-Firm Concentration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>95%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>89%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1951</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
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<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Peterson and Berger have noted, such extreme concentration was especially remarkable considering that the primary product—a 45-rpm record—could be produced and distributed for a few thousand dollars.\(^{18}\)

According to Peterson and Berger, from the 1930s through the early 1950s the majors maintained their dominant market position not by continually offering the cultural output that the public most wanted, but instead by employing competitive advantages of integration. Vertical integration began “upstream,” at the creative source, as major labels attempted to monopolize the most popular performers and songwriters through long-term exclusive contracts. Further vertical integration came from domination of major distribution and promotion channels—what Peterson and Berger referred to as “merchandising.” This owed primarily to the high cost and care involved in transporting fragile 78 records, which allowed the majors to monopolize national record distribution. “Downstream,” major labels leveraged exclusive contracts with major record outlets by offering wholesale record pricing and used threats of delayed shipments of their most popular sellers to discourage stores from carrying records by independent labels. Control of mass-media channels was reinforced through horizontal integration. This commonly took the form of ownership ties with firms in network radio or in the Hollywood film industry, which were the main channels for exposing popular songs.

Columbia records owned its own radio network, CBS, while RCA Victor shared close

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19 Ibid., 161-62.

20 Richard Peterson, “Why 55?,” Popular Music, 104. See also previous analysis in the current study in the Law and Regulation chapter, 103-05.


corporate connections with the NBC network. Decca and Capitol were corporately tied with major Hollywood film companies, MCA and Paramount, respectively. Through these connections the “big four” major labels were able to essentially dictate what programming reached the national audience through these key media outlets. 23

Unlike the majors, few companies in the specialty field were integrated to any significant extent. 24 Instead, these labels usually relied on independent contractors who provided pressing and distribution to any company paying for services. 25 At a time when distribution networks of this type were not yet developed on a national scale, independents were unable to compete on even terms with the majors in the mainstream market. 26 Therefore, success for specialty records remained confined to regional and local markets. Instances of mainstream “crossover” hits for specialty labels were rare, as the competitive stance of the majors was to exclude independents from competing in the national market. On the occasion that an independent release did show mainstream commercial potential it was in most cases co-opted by the majors through the common and long-standing industry practice known as “covering.” With covering, a major label, after identifying a potential hit by another label, recorded its own version. Then, by mobilizing its massive production, distribution, and promotional machinery, attempted to push their version up the


26 Ibid., 104.
charts more quickly than their competitors.\textsuperscript{27} According to a study by Anderson and Hesbacher “Popular American Music: Changes in the Consumption of Sound Recordings: 1940-1955,” 70% of songs that reached the Top 10 between 1946 and 1950 did so with multiple versions, with as many as seven versions of the same song reaching the charts.\textsuperscript{28} Thus, covering impacted the market in two notable respects. First, it contributed directly to homogeneity by creating a redundancy of hits. Secondly, it meant that releases by smaller, less integrated labels were effectively “drowned out” by major labels.\textsuperscript{29} As a result, labels from the specialty field were driven from the mainstream, and the two markets remained distinct regarding intended audience, musical aesthetic, and contractual arrangements.\textsuperscript{30}

During the mid-1950s the competitive relationship between major labels and independents in the mainstream market was transformed. This occurred as a combination of technological, legal, and social shifts eroded the majors’ mechanisms of market control and allowed a growing number of small firms to enter the business.\textsuperscript{31} Along with these factors, postwar aesthetic shifts further diminished the majors’ mechanisms of market control and bolstered the competitive threat posed by the independents. Effects of this

\textsuperscript{27} While independents also released cover records frequently, their more limited financial and logistical resources did not allow them to drive competitors from the market solely through domination of distribution and promotion as the majors had. Therefore, the practice of covering for small independents, in terms of effects on the market, was of a different nature than that discussed in the current chapter. For further analysis of changing practices of covering, see Sean Dineley, Covers Uncovered: A History of the “Cover Version,” from Bing Crosby to the Flaming Lips (M.A. thesis, University of Western Ontario, 2014).

\textsuperscript{28} Richard Peterson and David Berger, “Cycles,” American Sociological Review, 162.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{30} Timothy Dowd, “Musical Diversity,” Rassegna di Italiana di Sociologica, 4.

\textsuperscript{31} For analysis of the role of these factors in the rise of the independents see Chapter Three of the current study.
type derived not only from shifts on the demand side (e.g., the growing popularity of rhythm and blues among teenagers) but on the supply side as well. As the output of upstart hillbilly and race labels, such as Sun, Chess, and RPM, became more musically and sonically experimental, the majors’ go-to strategy of covering became less effective. The mainstream hits of the 1940s and early 1950s had relied on highly standardized, easily notated, and widely understood swing-era conventions that could be copied faithfully by any competent studio orchestra, and were, therefore, well-suited to the practice of covering.\textsuperscript{32} As the emerging rock ‘n’ roll aesthetic largely defied such conventions, the practice became less effective. Whereas in the three-year period from 1948 through 1950 fifty-five cover records made the Top Ten (twenty-one in 1950 alone), only fifteen covers appeared in the charts during the next three years (see Table 4.2, column 2). Furthermore, when compared to the homogenized offerings of the oligopolists, the diverse programming of independents from the specialty field fit more closely with the locally and regionally targeted formats adopted in the rapidly expanding post-television radio market. The shift in this market, combined with the growth of national networks of independent record distributors extended the promotional reach of small independent labels. This, to some degree, counteracted the competitive advantage that integration had afforded the oligopolists previously.

During the national emergence of rock ‘n’ roll, sparked in large part by Elvis’s move from Sun to RCA in late 1955, the major-label crooners of the 1940s and early 1950s were driven from the charts. By 1956 a generation of stars—Mitch Miller, Les Brown, Bing Crosby, Dinah Shore, and the Andrews Sisters—had all had their last ap-

Table 4.2. Number of Records and Experience of Performers in the *Billboard* Weekly Top Ten of the Popular Music Single Record Market and Change in Aggregate Sales by Year<sup>33</sup>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>RECORDS</th>
<th>COVERS</th>
<th>#1 HITS</th>
<th>NEW ARTISTS</th>
<th>ESTABLISHED ARTISTS</th>
<th>FADING ARTISTS</th>
<th>% Δ IN SALES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>48.8%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>-20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>-10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>+7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>44.1%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
<td>-2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>+4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>40.6%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>+1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>-3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>+23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
<td>+25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>+15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>+7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>73.1%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>+14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>60.3%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>-2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>66.2%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>+5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
<td>+5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>67.0%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>+0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>+6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>+10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>+16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>+9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>+17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>+2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>-1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>+0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>+5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>-4.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concentration in the mainstream market dropped continually with four-firm concentration falling from 74% to 25% and eight-firm concentration fall-

---

ing from 91% to 46% over the next eight years. The previous generation of pop stars was replaced by a new crop of rock ‘n’ roll and rhythm and blues acts: Elvis, Fats Domino, Bill Haley, Chuck Berry, The Everly Brothers, The Coasters, Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, Sam Cooke, The Silhouettes, The Platters, Ricky Nelson, Carl Perkins, and Little Richard, all of whom, except for Haley and Holly, had their first hits on small independent labels founded after 1948.35

By its nature there are limits on the degree to which musical diversity may be quantified. Systematic studies employing both musical and non-musical measures for diversity, however, have shown that the entrance of the new generation of rock ‘n’ roll stars into the mainstream charts represented a major increase in diversity over the narrow homogenized Tin Pan Alley aesthetic promoted by the major labels of the 1940s and early 1950s.36 In the following section, after considering generally the nature of diversity for cultural products, I examine the role of lowered market concentration in increasing diversity for mainstream popular music by considering concepts and arguments originating in Peterson and Berger’s study, “Cycles in Symbol Production.”

Concentration and Diversity: The Cyclical Account

In the field of diversity studies the need for a reliable definition for diversity that is specific enough to portray diversity of products on the market accurately, while also generalizable enough to be applicable under varying market conditions and industrial

34 Ibid., 163.
35 Ibid., 164.
36 Ibid., 163.
contexts has become apparent.\textsuperscript{37} Theoretical and empirical challenges have made such a definition elusive, however, and scholars continue to seek a diversity model capable of being applied systematically across a range of disciplines and product types. In efforts toward this goal Andrew Stirling in his article “A General Framework for Analysing Diversity in Science, Technology and Society” proposed a definition for diversity as a combination of three “necessary but individually insufficient properties,” which are widely recognized in an array of industries. These properties are as follows: variety (the number of different product types), balance (the amount that each type represented in the market), and disparity (the degree of difference among product types).\textsuperscript{38} Working from the three-fold definition, Stirling devised a generalized diversity model in which diversity within a given system may be calculated according to an index statistically weighted to compensate for varying relationships among the three properties of diversity and external variables as well.\textsuperscript{39}

The focus of Stirling’s study was primarily scientific and technological diversity, but subsequent studies have suggested its potential usefulness in studies of diversity for cultural and media products as well.\textsuperscript{40} Systematic study in the latter fields, however, presents particular difficulties, most notably in the way of operationalization. Such difficulties stem from the nature of products typical in cultural and media fields. A product such


\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 711-12.

as a musical recording, for example, represents what Pierre Bourdieu termed a “purely symbolic good” in that the product offered on the market has little or no value apart from its aesthetic or semiotic content.\textsuperscript{41} Therefore, content-based criteria of measuring diversity properties (especially variety and disparity) are necessarily determined by some type of subjective categorization; as Peterson and Berger concisely put it, “One judge’s homogeneity may be another’s diversity.”\textsuperscript{42} For this reason, Stirling cautioned that such criteria may produce results “lacking in applicability and robustness,” thereby making comparisons of diversity levels in different markets, or even within the same market under different historical conditions, problematic.\textsuperscript{43}

Non-content indicators, on the other hand, while presumably more operational, may not always reflect accurately the degree of diversity of the actual products themselves.\textsuperscript{44} In the popular music market, for example, a producer-oriented diversity indicator such as a rapid turnover of new acts in the charts may give a relatively accurate picture of balance among producers. Such an indicator, however, may not always reflect the degree of \textit{musical} diversity in the market. As Peterson and Berger have noted, as opposed to indicating diversity, high turnover can actually indicate the opposite state, \textit{e.g.,}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{42} Richard Peterson and David Berger, “Cycles,” \textit{American Sociological Review}, 163.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} According to Ranaivoson, “Any measure of diversity is limited and should therefore be questioned and this questioning should be made easier by the explication of the categorization used to build the index of Cultural Diversity.” Heritiana Ranaivoson, “Measuring Cultural Diversity,” \textit{iMindsVrije Universiteit Brussel}, 7.
\end{itemize}
aesthetic exhaustion, such as when a large number of “copycats” gain momentary success and then swiftly fall from the charts because they are derivative.\textsuperscript{45}

Despite distinct methodological challenges, the issue of diversity has taken a prominent place in cultural and media studies. An influential body of literature in these fields has been devoted specifically to examining the effects of industry concentration on diversity in the popular music market. In these studies scholars have employed a variety of content-based indicators (e.g., song length and the proportion of songs devoted to instrumental passages; lyrical themes; time, meter, form, accent, harmonic structure, and melodic contour), and non-content indicators for diversity (e.g., number of labels and hits; racial heterogeneity of performers) and have differed widely both in terms of their statistical and methodological approaches and in their conclusions on the effects of concentration.\textsuperscript{46}

Whether used as a model to emulate or as a point of departure, Peterson and Berger’s “Cycles” has provided a touchstone for diversity literature since its original publication in 1975.\textsuperscript{47} In this study the authors explored the relationship between industry concentration and standardization/ homogenization of musical programming in the postwar mainstream popular music market. Diversity was calculated according to four

\textsuperscript{45}In this situation there is high diversity but low innovation. See Richard Peterson, “Cultural Studies through the Production Perspective,” \textit{The Sociology of Culture}, ed. Diana Crane (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 176.


positive indicators: the total number of annual hits (see Table 4.2, column 1), labels (the name printed on the record; see Table 4.1, column 1), firms (parent corporations; see Table 4.1, column 2), and new artists (those having their first chart appearance; see Table 4.2, column 4) represented in the Billboard Weekly Top 10 charts. High numbers in any of these categories indicated high diversity/innovation. Two negative indicators for diversity were also employed: the percentage of established artists (see Table 4.2, column 5) and the annual number of cover records (see Table 4.2, column 2), with high numbers in the categories indicating standardization/homogenization. Fluctuations in diversity were tracked in relation to shifting trends of industry concentration across a twenty-six year period lasting from 1948 to 1973. This timeframe was divided further into five subsections to reflect changing trends in industry concentration: corporate concentration (1948-1955), competition (1956-1959), secondary consolidation (1960-1963), renewed growth (1964-1969), and reconcentration (1970-1973). Concentration was determined by the standard four- and eight-firm concentration ratio calculated by the percentage of annual chart slots occupied by the top four (see Table 4.1, column 4) and top eight firms (see Table 4.1, column 5), respectively. High percentages in these categories indicated high market concentration.

By relying on these indicators Peterson and Berger highlighted primarily producer diversity, more specifically, variety of producers on the market. As their analysis was based on data from the Billboard Weekly Top 10, however, it also gave a picture of balance. Indeed, the Billboard chart was compiled on the basis of combined wholesale and retail record sales, jukebox plays, and mainstream radio airplay, and therefore, gave a fairly reliable representation of overall exposure. Disparity among products was also
considered, specifically the diversity of lyrical themes in popular music hits. Analysis of lyrical content was based on previous independent studies by Horton, Carey, and others, as well as Peterson and Bergers’ own previous study from 1972, "Three Eras in the Manufacture of Popular Music Lyrics." 48

The statistical and theoretical framework employed by Peterson and Berger in “Cycles” can be seen as somewhat rudimentary. 49 Their analysis consisted simply of visual inspection of annual totals for their concentration and diversity indicators. They did not, for instance, statistically account for varying strengths of their diversity indicators or for the impact of external factors (such as changes in technology, regulation, overall economic prosperity), nor did they employ statistical indexes to show the degrees of difference among producers (i.e., disparity). 50 What “Cycles” lacked in these regards, however, it made up for in its practicality and its firm grounding in historical context. 51 The authors corroborated their argument with multiple independent lines of study to demonstrate that their relatively simple indicators of producer diversity did indeed give an accurate portrayal of musical diversity in the popular music industry over the time-frame of study. 52 Furthermore, they avoided a mechanistic or deterministic reading of the


50 Ibid., 10.


52 It is not surprising that Peterson and Berger, given their emphasis on historical context, do not propose that any of the indicators for diversity or concentration employed in “Cycles” be applied universally.
data by taking care to attribute shifts in diversity to the specific transformations of practice and market structure that brought these shifts about.

Although “Cycles” was grounded in cultural sociology, Peterson and Berger broke from contemporary studies by relying primarily on theories and perspectives from outside the field. Specifically, they drew on research from economics and industrial market theory. At the time, debate in these fields was split along two main points of view. The first one, put forth by economist Joseph Schumpeter in his 1942 book, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* attributed innovation to large firms. This view posited that large firms were more likely than small ones to innovate because their greater financial, material, and logistical resources made them better equipped for extensive research and development. Schumpeter argued further that innovation was most likely to occur during periods of high market concentration as control of the market made it easier for large firms to pass costs of research and development on to consumers. The opposing view in this debate, represented by George Stigler’s article, “The Case against Big Business,” contended the reverse scenario was true. According to Stigler, dominant firms tend toward complacency during periods of high concentration while small firms tend toward experimentation and innovation in efforts to better their position in the market. There-

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54 See Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism*.


fore, innovation and diversity in the market is more likely during periods of low concentration when a large number of small firms compete.\(^{57}\)

Peterson and Berger took Stigler’s general position, arguing that diversity is more likely during times of low market concentration / high competition. In their words, “When many firms successfully compete, there is a continual quest for product innovation and the single mass market tends to break up into a number of segments each representing a slightly different taste.”\(^{58}\) Although throughout “Cycles” the terms “diversity” and “innovation” were used more or less interchangeably, as this quotation suggests, innovation may generally be attributed to individual firms with diversity being the aggregate effect of innovation.\(^{59}\) Since “Cycles” Peterson and Berger have further clarified their position regarding the distinction between innovation and diversity: “There must be diversity if there is innovation, but the opposite is not true, because there can be great diversity with no innovation,” an example of this latter situation being the aforementioned “copycat” market scenario.\(^{60}\)

Peterson and Berger extended previous arguments for the negative effects of concentration on diversity by suggesting temporal parameters for this relationship. According to their hypothesis, long periods of gradually increasing market concentration and homogenization may be occasionally disrupted by short periods of rising diversity, which are preceded by momentary periods of low market concentration. While large conglom-

\(^{57}\) Timothy J. Dowd, “Concentration and Diversity Revisited,” *Social Forces*, 7.


erates tend toward homogenized production, diversity may appear during “relatively brief bursts of competition and creativity when various institutional barriers are eliminated for a variety of reasons.” By simultaneously highlighting the oligopolists’ tendency toward homogenized production while also contending that market dynamics may under certain conditions foster diversity, Peterson’s and Berger’s cyclical argument challenged two widely held perspectives at the time. To quote Dowd, the cyclical account “went against economist thinking that consumers are powerful forces in the market; that is, supply (e.g., oligopolists) responds to demand (i.e., audiences). On the other hand, it went against the thinking of Adorno (1941, 1975) and others who held that consumers are pliable; i.e., that demand responds to supply.” Rather than taking a position at either one of these opposing ends of the diversity argument, Peterson and Berger instead suggested an analytical shift away from these macro-level issues and toward uncovering the specific mechanisms, practices, and structures that shape diversity under actual historical conditions.

Whereas Schumpeter argued that advantages of size made large firms more likely than small firms to innovate, opponents of this view contended that aspects of “bigness” made large firms tend toward inertia rather than innovation. Inertia refers to the propensity of companies to eschew innovation in favor of established acts and proven sellers in the attempt to replicate past success. Several organizational aspects of large firms may contribute to inertia. Large conglomerations often (but not always) are bureaucratically structured, with complex, multi-leveled decision-making chains. Firms structured in this

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63 Ibid., 1.

way may also tend toward rationalization, i.e., a reliance on quantitative measures and systematic data analysis as opposed to the intuition or personal tastes of individuals.65

When such is the case, authority for decision-making may be shifted “up” the decision chain to accountants, executives, or committees at the top of the bureaucratic hierarchy and away from producers, performers, and other individuals most closely involved in initial creative processes (e.g., writing, performing, and recording of musical material). In this way, rationalization may lead to another tendency of large firms: centralization.66

The organization structures of all of the major labels of the 1940s and early 1950s, for instance, exhibited this tendency, with authority over virtually all programming decisions allocated to Artists and Repertoire (A&R) men. As a Capitol staff document recalled, “In those days, staff A&R men signed singers and vocal groups, chose songs, hired musicians and arrangers and produced the company’s artists in company studios. These A&R men oversaw everything from promotion to cover art, from unions to budget.”67

Employing rationalization and centralization may increase predictability, minimize disruptions, and help to simplify daily operations required for large, multi-leveled bureaucracies. This, in turn, may insulate firms from market instability and make for efficient standardized and routinized production. As Peterson and Berger argued, however, under such conditions firms may also become disconnected from audience demand, slow to adapt to market shifts, and generally more conservative in their programming.


decisions. In this view, oligopolists benefit from the status quo. Therefore, during periods of market stability there is little incentive for dominant firms to innovate. Instead, such firms may actually resist new trends or fads that challenge conventional production practices or that threaten to destabilize or de-routinize established modes of success. This may be especially true when new modes of production are unfamiliar or outside the competency of their standardized modes of production/performance. Columbia, for instance, did not feature a notable roster of rock ‘n’ roll acts until the early 1960s. This was primarily due to the objections of head pop A&R man, Mitch Miller, who was one of rock ‘n’ roll’s most outspoken early critics.

Thus, according to the cyclical account, as market concentration increases and is centralized, rationalized production prevails, and dominant firms tend toward standardization and orient their production toward the center of the market. This, in turn, causes innovation and diversity to decline. Peterson and Berger, however, also identified a counter-effect of the concentration/homogenization cycle: that domination of the market by a few companies that offer homogenized and standardized products may lead to an accumulation of what they termed “unsated demand.” This occurs when the overall market stagnates or shrinks as consumers whose needs are not met by the narrow range of products offered by the oligopolists withdraw from participation.

During the first period of Peterson and Berger’s study of “corporate concentration,” the major labels employed a generalist approach to programming. This was for-

69 Ibid., 23.
mulated to appeal to the largest—and to offend the smallest—segment of the overall national market.\textsuperscript{72} As highly integrated, centralized bureaucracies, these firms prospered by growing larger and dominating the market. Successful in this regard, the majors became ever more conservative in their musical programming. By the late 1940s over 80 percent of major-label hits fit a formula described by Peterson and Berger as “a conventionalized love cycle where sexual references are allegorical and social problems are unknown.”\textsuperscript{73} Although it may only be speculated as to which products audience members would have bought if presented with alternative choices, Peterson and Berger pointed to three indications that the increasingly narrow range of music offered by the majors had produced a massive accumulation of unsatisfied demand. First was the drastic decline in aggregate record sales (see Table 4.2, column 7). Initially, this may have been related to customer confusion resulting from the change in the primary consumer formats for recorded music in 1948 from the 78-rpm records to 45- and 33 1/3-rpm vinyl records. Considering the advantages in sonic quality and convenience of these new formats, as well as increasing general economic prosperity at the time, it is likely that the failure of the market to rebound was less related to this factor and more to the negligence of the majors to respond to changing audience tastes. Second was the flourishing of independent companies in the specialty field that catered to tastes outside the mainstream aesthetic. The increasing prominence of these labels was related to a number of external factors, but that the market share of these companies grew continually as the mainstream market shrunk suggests that a considerable portion of the unsatisfied consumers who

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 159.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 163.
withdrew from the mainstream market turned to these peripheral counterparts as an alternative to the programming offered by the majors. Third was the 261% in overall record sales that occurred between 1955 and 1959 (see Table 4.2, Column 7, which shows the percent change in record sales in constant dollars, 1948-1973). That this explosive increase in sales corresponded with the entrance of independents from the specialty field into the mainstream market suggests that the output of these labels satisfied a major portion of audience demand that the majors had neglected: namely, teenagers looking for dance music.

Throughout the period of corporate concentration the majors largely avoided any direct competition with the independents by actively excluding small firms from the market. This kept the market relatively stable. Furthermore, it meant that relatively few recordings reached the charts during this time and those that did were largely by established stars promoted by the top-four firms (see Table 4.2, columns 1 and 5). This situation changed during the mid-1950s, however, as a flood of new, mostly underfunded independents severely challenged the four-firm oligopoly that had dominated the mainstream market up to that point. From 1956 until 1959 four-firm concentration dropped by more than half from 74% to 34%, and eight-firm concentration fell from 91% to 58% as the number of firms producing hits tripled (see Table 4.1, columns 2, 4, and 5). At the same time the total number of hits nearly doubled, and the percentage of new artists increased from a low of 23% in 1949 to a high of 73% in 1959 (see Table 4.2, columns 1 and 4).
The independents, lacking resources to control the market, had employed the opposite strategy from the majors by employing a specialist approach. This tactic relied on remaining small in order to be able to respond quickly to shifting demand. In “Why 55?” Peterson identified two characteristic organizational types for small postwar independents. The first was the “job-shop.” This organizational strategy was exemplified by Chess Records, which farmed various tasks of production such as recording, pressing, promotion, and distribution out to any number of separate independent companies on a contractual basis. Chess, founded in 1950, routinely recorded their acts “out-of-house” leasing masters from freelance recording studios, one of which was Sam Phillips’s Memphis Recording Service. Phillips’s own label, Sun, founded in 1952, exhibited the other organizational type, identified by Peterson as “solo production.” With this organization type all aspects of production related to the musical and sonic properties of the record (e.g., performing, recording, engineering, mixing, and mastering) as well as promotion were conducted “in-house” under direct supervision of one individual, while manufacture and distribution of records were performed by different companies.

Frequently, both the job-shop and solo-production organization types were decidedly “non-rationalized” in their operations. In such firms individuals down the production chain worked with relatively high autonomy with decisions often being based on personal tastes or preferences rather than quantitative data analysis. As a result, these firms were typically unstable in their operations and less insulated from market shifts than the large multileveled bureaucracies. Non-rationalized organizational strategies,

77 Ibid., 3-4.
however, also allowed the independents to be more in tune to audience demand, better able to respond to shifts in the market quickly, and generally more flexible in their practices. For these reasons, the highly turbulent conditions of the post-television popular music market gave smaller, more innovative firms an advantage. Whereas the large, centralized bureaucracies of the major labels remained largely committed to the old swing and crooner-pop aesthetic, the small upstarts from the specialty field were quick to pick up on the growing popularity of rhythm and blues, then rock ‘n’ roll. Doing so, these smaller firms were able to take over three-quarters of the mainstream market from the oligopolists by the early 1960s.  

The rock ‘n’ roll output of the postwar independents differed formally from the Tin Pan Alley aesthetic by relying more heavily on blues forms and combining these with elements of white country music. The lyrical perspective of rock ‘n’ roll represented the values of the newly affluent postwar youth culture and featured issues previously absent in mainstream popular music: confrontation with parents, teachers, and other authority figures; celebration of youth leisure activities and rebellion; and more candid treatment of sexual relations. Beyond lyrical and formal elements, rock ‘n’ roll performers and producers routinely employed experimental approaches to the recording process cultivating a raw musical and sonic aesthetic characterized by technical amateurism and youthful enthusiasm. Outside of the studio as well, the stage presentation of rock ‘n’ roll performers differed markedly from that of the previous generation of pop stars. Opposed to the staid

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79 Ibid., 105, 108.


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mannerisms and formal dress of the pop crooners, the rock ‘n’ rollers exhibited a flamboyant, unrestrained style influenced heavily by black gospel and rhythm and blues showmen and women, both in terms of performance antics and dress. Elvis himself, as a teenager, was a regular spectator at the All Night Gospel Singings held at Memphis’s Ellis Auditorium and a frequent visitor to Memphis’s integrated entertainment district on Beale Street. The influences that he absorbed from black performers in these venues are evident in his own music and performance.  

He was also known to frequent Lansky Brothers on Beale Street, a store known for catering its fashion to a predominantly black clientele, which included jazz and blues stars such as Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton, and B. B. King. Lansky’s remained one of Elvis’s preferred clothiers throughout his career.

That the aforementioned aspects of rock ‘n’ roll did, in fact, represent significant innovations in mainstream popular music can be seen through two indicators. First, was the adoption of the new name “rock ‘n’ roll” by the industry, in the press, and among fans. As Peterson and Berger have noted: “Nontrivial innovation in music is generally signaled by the wide use of a new name for a style of music and an associated group of performers. Possible examples of innovation include rave, techno, acid jazz, grunge, rap, house, New Age, disco, funk, punk, acid rock, Motown, big beat, folk-rock, soul, rockabilly, do-wop, torch, swing, etc. . . .”

The second indicator of innovation was the hos-

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tility shown by many of those within the music industry with ties to the previous Tin Pan Alley pop aesthetic. Frank Sinatra, for one, attacked rock ‘n’ roll on both aesthetic and intellectual grounds, calling the music: “phony and false, and sung, written and played, by cretinous goons.”\textsuperscript{84} The anti-rock ‘n’ roll agenda was also taken up by many in the national press and in trade magazines who disparaged the music for its supposed deleterious social and moral influence on the teenage audience. Regardless of whether such attacks were well-founded, the sizable reaction of those within the established music industry and press intimate that rock ‘n’ roll—and its associated social and cultural movement—was perceived as significant and radically different from what had come before it.\textsuperscript{85}

Thus, as Peterson and Berger had hypothesized, competition from innovative small firms from 1956 through 1959 led directly to increased innovation and diversity in the mainstream popular music market. This is evident in the increased range of lyrical themes as well as in the rise in the overall number of firms, labels, annual hits, and new artists in the charts (see Table 4.1, columns 1 and 2, and Table 4.2, columns 1 and 4). These findings confirmed one central component of the cyclical argument, \textit{i.e.,} that competition from small firms drives diversity in the market. The other main component of the cyclical account, however, rested on the assertion that firms may \textit{adapt} in response to changing market conditions. On one hand, small firms may face pressure to rationalize to ensure sustainable success. Oligopolists on the other hand, may be compelled to diver-

\textsuperscript{84} Frank Sinatra, quoted in Richard Peterson and David Berger, “Cycles,” \textit{American Sociological Review}, 165.

sify their product lines, whether in response to competition or to other shifts in market conditions.

In spite of the substantial loss of market share from 1956 to 1959, profits for the major labels had remained relatively stable, buoyed by the rise in overall record sales. Still, when it became apparent that rock ‘n’ roll was more than just a passing fad, the oligopolists sought to regain their former market dominance. With the old ways of quashing smaller competitors largely ineffective, the majors pursued new competitive strategies. The talent rosters of the major firms were not well-versed in the rock ‘n’ roll aesthetic. Therefore, the majors turned to independent labels as a resource for new musical talent. This was accomplished in two ways. One was through “talent raids” where the majors bought out contracts of independent rock ‘n’ roll acts. The most striking example of this was RCA’s purchase of Elvis’s Sun contract in 1955 for $40,000—the most ever paid for a recording contract up to that point. The second way was through organizational diversification. This was done by forming new semi-autonomous divisional labels and / or establishing contractual alliances with independents, which operated as subsidiary labels. By the late 1950s three of the four major firms were releasing music on at least one divisional or subsidiary label devoted to rock ‘n’ roll or rhythm and blues: Decca on Coral and Brunswick, Columbia on Epic, and RCA Victor on Camden, X, Vik, and Groove. The shift in the competitive relationship between the majors and independents spurred the formation of an increasingly complex new market structure. As Peterson and Berger described, “Beginning in the late 1950s, a welter of different sorts of

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86 Ibid.

87 Timothy J. Dowd, “Concentration and Diversity Revisited,” Social Forces, 16.
arrangements between corporations and labels emerged. It has been difficult in some cases to decide whether a label represents an independent company or is an appendage of another firm.”

Contractual complications in the career of Buddy Holly demonstrate just how convoluted the arrangements between firms and labels could become. Originally signed to Decca in 1956, Holly was released from his recording contract after his first singles failed to chart. On termination of the contract Decca retained the rights to the recordings and stipulated that none of the songs recorded while signed to the label could be released by a competing label for a period of five years. After moving to the Brunswick label in 1957, Holly sidestepped Decca’s restrictions by releasing sides under the band name, The Crickets. Doing so, he achieved his first hit with a demo version of “That’ll be the Day,” recorded during the first Decca sessions. Soon after, Holly and producer / manager Norman Petty discovered that Brunswick was actually a subsidiary of Decca, thus legally clearing Holly to release material from the Decca period on Brunswick under his own name once again. By this point, however, Holly had signed another contract with the Coral label, also owned by Decca. For a period in 1957 Holly simultaneously charted hits under his own name on Coral and with The Crickets on Brunswick. Meanwhile, Decca, compelled by the breakout success of the Brunswick hits, also released repackaged versions of the original recording sessions on its flagship Decca label.

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Besides demonstrating the growing complexity of the links between firms and labels, Holly’s situation with Decca also shows an increasing adoption of non-rationalized production practices by major recording firms.\textsuperscript{91} In Holly’s case non-rationalization went to the extent that Decca allowed its multiple divisions not only to have competing releases but to have competing releases by essentially the same artist. Undoubtedly, accountants and marketing personnel up the chain at Decca were aware of—and likely objected to—the inefficiencies involved in allowing internal competition among their divisional labels.\textsuperscript{92} After the quick and unexpected rise of Holly’s singles on Coral and Brunswick, however, the decision was made to sacrifice efficiency in hopes that Holly’s star potential could tap the teenage market and the growing craze for rock ‘n’ roll.

The initial flourishing of rock ‘n’ roll was relatively short-lived. Due to a variety of factors—Elvis’s enlistment in the Army, Little Richard’s retirement to become a preacher, Chuck Berry’s imprisonment for sexual misconduct, the deaths of Buddy Holly, Richie Valens and the Big Boppers in a plane crash, and the national payola scandals that embroiled deejay Alan Freed—the movement’s most prominent figures were all largely out of the public eye by 1959. With the rock ‘n’ roll explosion tamped down, the original generation of rock ‘n’ roll stars was replaced by “teen idols” such as Pat Boone, Frankie Avalon, and Paul Anka. These performers presented a version of rock ‘n’ roll that was more restrained, both in terms of musical performance and stage persona. Featuring less improvisation, more standardized arrangements, a return to abstract love themes, and a polishing or outright removal of “rawer” elements of vocal and instrumental timbre, the teen-idol aesthetic was fashioned to cater to the teenage audience without overly offend-

\textsuperscript{91} Richard Peterson and David Berger, “Cycles,”\textit{ American Sociological Review}, 169.

\textsuperscript{92}\textit{Ibid.}
ing parents. On the whole the new “sanitized” version of the rock ‘n’ roll star was closer to that of the previous generation Tin Pan Alley crooners than any of the original rock ‘n’ rollers. Nonetheless, the entrance of rock ‘n’ roll had lasting effects on the structure of the mainstream popular music market. By 1960 all of the big four majors had been swept from their positions atop the market except for RCA, which retained its place almost entirely due to the massive national success of Elvis.

Concentration continued to decline, reaching a low point during the next period, 1959-1963 (secondary consolidation). But, while the increase in diversity that corresponded with the shift from corporate concentration (1948-1955) to competition (1956-1959) had clearly confirmed the hypothesis that competition from small firms drives diversity in the market, the effect of concentration on diversity in the following periods is more ambiguous. According to the indicators of Peterson and Berger, diversity did not peak during this lowest point of concentration. It came instead during the following period from 1964-1969 (renewed growth) when concentration levels were once again on the rise.

The authors offered three possible explanations for continued diversity in the face of rising concentration. First, they cited previous studies that suggested that the breakthrough success of Bob Dylan’s folk-rock albums on Columbia and the Beach Boys’ symphonically orchestrated pop albums on Capitol had broken the tentativeness of major

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label personnel and encouraged wide-ranging musical and lyrical experimentation.  

Second was the possibility that, even though concentration had reached its low point in 1962, it was not until the following period (1964-1969) that the quest for discovering new talent reached the point where major firms began to grant artists unprecedented autonomy over material selections, stylistic direction, and other aesthetic decisions. Thirdly, the increasing range of lyrical themes (often polemical) of new rock styles such as folk rock and psychedelic rock may have been related to broader social movements such as the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. They cautioned, nonetheless, that social turmoil may not always be reflected in popular music, such as during the Depression of the 1930s, when the market was controlled almost entirely by three major firms “and popular music took no cognizance of the calamitous events of the time.”

By the final period of Peterson and Berger’s study high levels of concentration had returned. Diversity remained high as well, however. Although the authors noted a general trend toward lyrical conventionality from 1969 through 1970, they conceded that lyrics during the final year of their study represented a diverse array of unconventional themes: “[a] brief inspection of the hit song lyrics from 1973, however, does not suggest a return to pre-1955 homogeneity. There were songs about sexual intercourse, homosexuality, interracial dating, drugs, filicide, abortion, and the follies of being a war hero.”

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98 Ibid., 169.
Regarding non-content diversity, the annual total of records in the charts remained relatively high as did the number of new acts (see Table 4-2, columns 1 and 4).

Peterson and Berger’s predictions for the future of diversity for mainstream popular music, however, were guarded, if not pessimistic. While acknowledging the current state of relatively high diversity, they issued the following warning:

Since 1968, however, three movements have done much to dampen the radicalizing potential of mass media disseminated popular music. These are the same factors which [sic] ‘tamed’ jazz. . . . They are the ‘reoligo-polization’ of the industry, the emergence of moralist critics of the rock ethos, and the co-optation of rock’s critical thrust. 99

That the negative effects of concentration had yet to reveal themselves was attributed to the fact that the major firms continued to allow intra-firm competition among their divisional and subsidiary labels. Citing what they referred to as the “frailty of diversity,” Peterson and Berger predicted that this competitive situation was likely tentative. Pointing to recent industry developments such as the ouster of former Columbia divisional president, Clive Davis, they foresaw a return of the closed system of production. In their view, on regaining control of the market, major firms would again seek to eliminate intra-firm competition to increase production efficiency and therefore would return to their practice of driving smaller firms that threatened the status quo from the market. This situation, in turn, would lead to another cycle of gradually increasing concentration and a corresponding decline in innovation and diversity in the popular music market. 100


Concentration and Diversity: The Open System Account

Subsequent studies confirmed some aspects of Peterson’s and Berger’s predictions on the future of concentration and diversity in the popular music market, but refuted others. Robert Burnett in his 1990 study *Concentration and Diversity in the International Phonogram Industry* showed that, as per their prediction, the trend of rising concentration continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. By 1989 four-firm concentration reached 82% (vs. 81% in 1948) while eight-firm concentration reached 96% (vs. 95% in 1948), thus exceeding the historical highs of the late 1940s. But counter to the cyclical hypothesis, the upward trend for concentration did not produce a decline in diversity. To the contrary, Burnett’s analysis showed that, while diversity did decline somewhat during the 1970s, it reached the highest levels since the mid-1960s during the peak of concentration in the late 1980s.

Seeking to address such ambiguities, a number of studies extended concepts from “Cycles” while placing focus on the role of new organizational structures instituted by major firms in the post-rock ‘n’ roll market. These studies highlighted a broad shift in the competitive stance of major labels toward independents from one of exclusion to one of incorporation. Whereas in the closed system of the 1940s and early 1950s the majors had employed advantages of integration to drive smaller competitors from the market, after being blindsided by the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll the majors increasingly

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sought to buy out or to form contractual alliances with independent labels rather than to squelch their success. This resulted in the emergence of an open system of production in the mainstream popular music industry.

Comparing trends in the firm-to-label-ratios from the pre-rock ‘n’ roll era to the 1980s gives support for the open system account (see Table 4.1, columns 1 and 2). Whereas during the 1940s and early 1950s most of the majors had released recordings on no more than three or four labels, by the 1960s major firms released music on increasingly numerous labels.104 This trend continued throughout the following decades. Notably, the most dominant firm during this period, Warner Brothers, who controlled the market with an average 20% of the total market share during the 1970s and 29% during the 1980s, was also the firm with the highest number of labels. Employing a diversified organization structure, Warner produced hits on an array of labels ranging from subsidiary independents Atlantic, Elektra, Asylum, and Island; to divisional labels Capricorn / Warner, Swan Song / Atlantic, Slash / Warner, Ruthless / Atlantic, Delicious Vinyl / Island; and by freelance independent producers and artists such as Quincy Jones (QWest), Prince (Paisley Park), and David Geffen (Geffen).105

Whereas the centralized bureaucratic organization structures of major labels of the 1940s and early 1950s had made them slow to respond to changing audience tastes, the multidivisional organizational strategies instituted by firms like Warner Brothers gave them the ability to respond more quickly to shifts in the market. As Dowd observed:


105 The trend toward more labels to firms is significant in that, to quote Lopes, “The larger the number of decision makers involved in producing records, the greater the potential for innovation and diversity, regardless of whether innovation and diversity are the specific goal of major record companies.” See Paul D. Lopes, “Innovation and Diversity,” American Sociological Review, 62.
Rather than stressing production capabilities that served them well in the stable past, some large firms now stress information capabilities that help them negotiate the unstable present. Consequently, such firms seek to reduce the centralized hierarchies that slow both the processing of information and the implementing of change.  

The majors had previously sought to squelch new trends and fads to maintain market stability, but with this new strategy they sought to profit from them. Success in this regard hinged on the ability of firms to capitalize early on trends and fads as they emerged.

In a talk with New York Stock Exchange securities analysts in 1973 president of CBS Arthur Taylor (1972-1976) articulated the emphasis now being placed on organizational speed and flexibility by Columbia Records:

> We think Columbia Records is particularly well suited to maintain its leadership of the recorded music industry. Because of the versatility of our catalog—which covers nearly every point of the music spectrum—we can and do capitalize on the rapidly changing public tastes. As I speak, black music and country music appear to be two primary growth areas in the coming year. If that perspective changes by the time you leave this room, I can still assure you Columbia Records will have a major entry into whatever new area is broached by the vagaries of public tastes.

The organizational potential for versatility and quickness of multidivisional firms, notably Columbia and Warner Brothers, was achieved by allowing autonomy for various contracted and divisional labels and for personnel down the decision chain with their "ears close to the ground." Such firms continued to exercise control over and to profit from merchandising as they had since the 1930s. But instead of using control of promotion,

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distribution, and manufacturing to crush small competitors, they now essentially employed these channels as distribution and promotional arms for semi-autonomous labels, which increasingly retained control over artist rosters as well as the writing, performing, and production of musical material. As one Warner Brothers’ executive summarized the new competitive strategy: “We no longer cover hit records any more, we cover hit philosophies.”

Thus, in the open system of production there is an important distinction between control of ownership and creative control. Noting this distinction, Dowd in the article “Concentration and Diversity Revisited: Production Logics and the U.S. Mainstream Recording Market, 1940-1990,” attributed new organizational strategies for the majors in the post-rock ‘n’ roll mainstream market to what he termed, a “decentralized logic of production.” With decentralized production large firms employ information capacities of semiautonomous small labels and divisions as a tool to reduce inertial tendencies and remain responsive to shifting fads, thereby reducing unsated demand and maintaining effective control of the market. Although sacrificing some degree of efficiency, large firms employing decentralized organizational structures may be better equipped to deal with periods of instability and turbulence in the market than large multi-leveled bureaucracies. Furthermore, as both Dowd and Paul D. Lopes have argued, such organizational strategies may also benefit diversity in the market by mitigating the negative effects of

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concentration. This comes as dominant firms employ diversification—as opposed to exclusion—as the primary mechanism of market control.\footnote{113}{Timothy J. Dowd, “Concentration and Diversity Revisited,” \textit{Social Forces}, 11-12. See also Paul D. Lopes, “Innovation and Diversity,” \textit{American Sociological Review}, 70.}

With the competitive strategies that emerged in the post-rock ‘n’ roll market, dominant firms increasingly viewed independents not as competitive threats, but instead as potential resources, either as allies or acquisitions. This created the possibility of both high concentration and a high number of new recording firms to coexist in the market.\footnote{114}{Timothy J. Dowd, “Concentration and Diversity Revisited,” \textit{Social Forces}, 17-18.}

As Dowd, quoting mass-media scholar Heikki Hellman, contended:

\begin{quote}
The logic of decentralized production has thus led to a situation that departs from the prediction of cyclical proponents. ‘The cycles have changed into symbiosis. The new state of competition has to some extent created a musical culture richer in variation.’ In particular, the negative effect of concentration is reduced, if not eliminated, when majors successfully employ decentralized production.\footnote{115}{\textit{Ibid.}, 11-12; and Heikki Hellman, “The New State of Competition in the Record Industry,” \textit{Sosiologia} XX/285, 355.}
\end{quote}

As discussed previously, Peterson and Berger in “Cycles” also recognized the potential of decentralization to mitigate the negative effects of concentration, partially attributing decentralization and non-rationalization to continued diversity during reconcentration in the late 1960s and 1970s. But whereas they took a “frail” view of diversity, other scholars have taken a more durable perspective, arguing that what Peterson and Berger saw as a temporary strategy to deal with market turbulence and competition from small independents has since become institutionalized practice for major firms.\footnote{116}{Paul D. Lopes, “Innovation and Diversity,” \textit{American Sociological Review}, 57; and Timothy J. Dowd, “Concentration and Diversity Revisited,” \textit{Social Forces}, 11-12. Since the publication of “Cycles” Peterson and Berger have also revised their position, taking a longer term view of the changing competitive relation-}
Studies highlighting the mitigating effects of decentralization on concentration have often focused on the period of high concentration in the 1980s during which such innovations as new wave, rap, and hip hop emerged in the mainstream market.\textsuperscript{117} Dowd, however, traced the beginnings of the decentralized production logic back further to the mid-1950s rock ‘n’ roll explosion.\textsuperscript{118} Indeed, a defining moment in rock ‘n’ roll’s emergence—Elvis’s move from Sun to RCA in 1955—demonstrates practices characteristic of decentralized production in two key respects. First, it demonstrates the greater tendency of major labels toward decentralization of control over musical production, recording, and other “creative” aspects of musical production.\textsuperscript{119} After Elvis’s first RCA sessions in Nashville under producer Chet Atkins generated middling results, the endeavor was moved to RCA’s New York studio. From this point Elvis was given virtually free rein over the recording sessions, selecting the material to record, the style of performance, and the “take” to keep as the final master, even though such autonomy over the recording process for a singer was unprecedented for major labels at the time.\textsuperscript{120}

Secondly, the scenario gives a picture of the growing symbiosis between the majors and independents in the new competitive environment. Ironically, the demand for Elvis’s records in regional country and western and rhythm and blues markets (formerly


\textsuperscript{119} Although manufacturing, promotion, and management roles may also exhibit creativity, “creative” in this context refers to those aspects of the production process directly related to the sonic and musical properties inscribed on the product offered on the market.

\textsuperscript{120} See previous analysis from the current study from the chapter on technology, 45-46.
the hillbilly and race markets, respectively) had strained Sun’s financial resources almost to the breaking point. Upfront costs for manufacturing and distribution, along with $5,000 in back royalties owed to Elvis, had left the label with liabilities totaling to three times its assets.\footnote{121 Peter Guralnick, \textit{Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley} (New York: Black Bay Books, 1994), 225.} While Phillips had taken Elvis’s Sun singles as far as the logistical capabilities of his small label would allow, the move to RCA gave Elvis massive nationwide exposure. On purchase of the contract RCA re-released all five of the Sun singles on its flagship label as well as the newly recorded singles for RCA, promoting the records in the country and western, rhythm and blues, and the mainstream pop markets simultaneously. Although Sun was never purchased by a major label, the influx of cash from the sale of Elvis’s contract essentially kept Sun from bankruptcy. Phillips kept Sun in operation until selling the label off in 1969. After Elvis, three other artists originally recorded by Sun—Johnny Cash, Conway Twitty, and Charlie Rich—went on to have hits for major labels on both the country and western and the mainstream charts.

Thus, as the majors have moved increasingly toward decentralized production, barriers to entry in the mainstream market became more permeable to small competitors. The initial burst of innovation that attended the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll was directly related to increasing competition from small independent firms with ties to the specialty recording field. Independent labels, producers, and performers were also pivotal in subsequent innovations in the mainstream musical aesthetic such as soul, Motown, funk, disco, punk, hip hop, gangsta rap, and grunge. Innovation in the post-rock ‘n’ roll mainstream popular music market has not been confined solely to small independents, however. Other arguable instances of innovation—the British invasion, acid rock, folk rock,
progressive rock, heavy metal, and new wave—were spearheaded by artists on major labels or their divisional and subsidiary labels. That these instances of innovation happened during periods when major firms maintained control of the market may be attributed to the changing nature of competition. Whereas in the closed system of production, competition primarily took place either between large and small firms (during low concentration) or inter-firm competition among oligopolists (during high concentration) in the open system intra-firm competition among the various divisions of major firms became commonplace as well. As proponents of the open system account have contended, increasing competition of the latter type has led firms to grant performers and producers, on the whole, more autonomy in terms of aesthetic decisions. In turn, this greater degree of autonomy has likely increased the possibility for innovation and diversity in the face of concentration.

**Occupational Careers**

Bringing analytical focus in from the organizational to the individual level in this final section, I briefly consider the impact of decentralization on the relative balance of occupational careers in the postwar mainstream popular music industry. The production of cultural goods in commercial industries requires long-term collective action of a large number of individuals in various occupational roles. Goals and practices of these individuals are shaped by the reward systems in place within industries and organizations of production. This consequently shapes the nature of products created and offered on the market.
In this manner, the impact of the production system on the nature of cultural goods is derived not only from the institutional factors (i.e., the production of culture) but also by the relationships among individuals throughout the production process (i.e., the culture of production).\textsuperscript{122} Although the occupational background of every individual is unique, Peterson has delineated four generalized career models commonly found within cultural industries.\textsuperscript{123} The first of these two are craftsman and showman. These are characteristic of individuals on the “creative” side of the career spectrum (e.g., musicians, writers, performers). The second two—functionary and entrepreneur—typically apply to those on the “administrative” end (e.g., A&R, producers, promoters).\textsuperscript{124}

Career types in creative and administrative categories parallel one another in significant ways. Both craftsmen and functionaries succeed in their occupation by accomplishing their work as efficiently and inconspicuously as possible. Session musicians, for example, and “song factory” writers are highly skilled technicians—“professional” in every sense—who perform their tasks (often narrowly defined) in a routine, dependable fashion to provide a high-quality standardized product. He or she is rewarded by securing steady work and establishing a high reputation among fellow craftsmen.\textsuperscript{125} Similarly,


\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid. While I use the conventional term crafts-“men” and A & R “man,” these words are intended to represent both male and female individuals.
functionaries, like the A&R man, are also rewarded for accomplishing tasks in a predictable, standardized, and efficient way. They are incentivized by a salary and the possibility of moving up to more prominent positions in the bureaucratic hierarchy. As both the craftsmen and the functionaries achieve success by reliably following procedures and executing tasks handed down from the top of the bureaucracy, individuals in these career models may tend toward conservative choices to avoid upsetting the status quo and to ensure the stability of their employment.\footnote{126} As opposed to craftsmen, showmen succeed by drawing as much attention to themselves as possible through repudiating established standards, conventions, creative practices, or social conduct.\footnote{127} Be it by vulgarity, eccentricity, flashiness, sexual suggestiveness, or whatever other means, every decision is calculated for its effect on the audience and success is measured in terms of the magnitude of reaction elicited.\footnote{128} As their success depends on disruption, such individuals are inimical to the goal of efficient, rationalized, and standardized production and therefore are not well suited to organizational practices of large bureaucratic firms. On the administrative side, entrepreneurs, like showmen, also benefit from disruption of standardized practices as their success depends on recognizing unsated demand created by standardized production and recombining creative, logistical, financial, and promotional tasks in novel, profitable ways to

\footnote{126}Ibid., 8–9. See also Richard A. Peterson and Narasihman Anand, “The Production of Culture,” Annual Review of Sociology, 317.

\footnote{127}For further examination of the role of conventions in cultural production, see Howard S. Becker, “Art as Collective Action,” American Sociological Review XXXIX/6 (December 1974), 770–74.

accommodate markets neglected by oligopolists.\textsuperscript{129} Unlike the “top down” decision chain of bureaucratic firms, both showman and entrepreneur career models operate in a “bottom up” manner basing decisions on the perceived wants and needs of the audience.\textsuperscript{130}

Whereas craftsmen and functionaries are agents of continuity, showmen and entrepreneurs are agents of innovation. To quote Peterson, however, “Craftsmen are not all just hacks . . . many practice long and hard to perfect new ways of performing their craft tasks and, in the process, make incremental changes in the aesthetic.”\textsuperscript{131} Similarly, functionaries make many of the decisions that shape the nature of products down the production chain.\textsuperscript{132} Furthermore, in actual practice career types nearly always overlap to some degree. Individuals within the industry frequently fit different career types simultaneously or move from one career model to another throughout their employment.\textsuperscript{133}

Although in practice the four career patterns rarely are found in “pure form,” Peterson’s model, nonetheless, provides a useful framework to view broad trends in the balance of occupational careers within the industry.\textsuperscript{134} In “Why 55?” Peterson noted an overall shift from a predominance of craftsmen and functionaries to showmen and entre-

\textsuperscript{129} Peterson noted that, while entrepreneurs are most often thought of as self-employed business people, they may also be found in organizations. See Richard Peterson, “Why 55?,” \textit{Popular Music}, 109.


\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Ibid.}, 109.

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Ibid.}
preneurs in the popular music industry beginning with the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll. The typical production chain of major labels took songs from professional writing staffs (craftsmen). These were provided to the A&R man (functionary) who chose which material to record and who would record it (craftsman or showman). Songs were recorded in a routine fashion by studio musicians and staff studio engineers (craftsmen) who operated under the supervision of the A&R man. With the postwar independents, on the other hand, material was sourced in various ways (e.g., staff writers, previously recorded songs, and material written by the performers and musicians), but the performers —e.g., Elvis, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis—were invariably showmen. The rock ‘n’ roll stars cultivated an outlandish image both in their stage personas and in their personal lives. Often displaying technical and musical amateurism, these figures drew disdain from craftsmen and functionaries within the industry for violating professional aesthetic standards and conventional practices. The disdain, however, was matched by fervent adulation from audiences. The controversy caused by Elvis’s first appearances on national television elicited this type of polarized response. Uproar was such that CBS famously required that Elvis be filmed only from the waist up on The Ed Sullivan Show as his pelvic gyrations were considered too risqué for the network’s standards of public decency. Controversy aside, the ratings were exceptionally high thanks largely to frenzied adoration from the teenage audience. Regarding the dual response to Elvis, Jack Gould, in a 1956 New York Times article commented:

135 Ibid., 110-11.
136 Ibid.
Neither the criticism of Presley nor of the teen-agers who admire him is particularly to the point. Presley has fallen into a fortune with a routine that in one form or another has always existed on the fringe of show business; in his gratifying figure and suggestive gestures the teen-agers have found something [that] for the moment seems exciting or important.\textsuperscript{137}

Garish stage presentation aside, as Peterson noted, as opposed to the well-crafted standardized songs of the professional song writers, the rock ‘n’ roll showmen wrote and recorded material based on their own personal experiences and thus appealed to audiences in a more direct and seemingly personal manner than the pop-crooners. Furthermore, by combining the roles of writer and showman artists, such as Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, and Eddie Cochran, they also created the blueprint for the singer-songwriter career model that emerged in rock music during the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{138}

The independent record producer (entrepreneur) (e.g., Sam Phillips) fulfilled many of the same roles as the A&R man (e.g., Mitch Miller), although in a decidedly different fashion. Rather than pursuing standardized routine production, producers for independents developed practices and chose material, musicians, and promotion specifically to highlight the idiosyncratic aspects of a performer’s music or image in order to stand out in the market.\textsuperscript{139} Such specialized attention was not typical for A&R men working for large bureaucratic labels. As one independent producer pointed out of RCA


\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Ibid.}, 111.

\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Ibid.}
in the mid-1950s, “Victor has 175 artists, they can’t possibly do justice to all of them.”

While the career model of the entrepreneurial producer originated with independents, with the general shift toward decentralized production in the post rock ‘n’ roll era the producer came to replace the A&R man as the primary administrative figure for major labels as well.

Conclusion

Elvis’s career pattern, both in his initial rise to regional fame and his subsequent national stardom on RCA Victor, exemplified transformative shifts in industry and organization structure in the popular music industry arising during the pop culture moment. Shifts in production practices toward non-rationalization, decentralization, were pioneered by small, underfunded independent companies like Sun, Chess, RPM, and numerous others. As these small independent labels took over the majority of the mainstream popular music market in the turbulent conditions in the wake of television, major labels responded by abandoning their old methods of dominating the market (e.g., integration and covering) and developed new competitive strategies to regain their former dominance. Doing so, the majors, following the example of the independents, turned increasingly to non-rationalized and decentralized production strategies. This came through organizational diversification, both by forming new semi-autonomous divisional labels and by incorporating independent competitors within their existing organizational structures. In this chapter I have highlighted aspects of the shifting competitive relationship

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between major record firms and small independents in the postwar mainstream popular music market by focusing on the relationship of industry concentration with diversity and innovation. In the late 1940s and early 1950s the dominance of large centralized bureaucracies resulted in homogenized and standardized mainstream musical programming. As major firms increasingly adopted decentralized multidivisional structures in the post-rock ‘n’ roll era, the negative effect of concentration on innovation and diversity was reduced greatly. This happened as major firms employed diversification as opposed to exclusion as the primary competitive strategy to maintain control of the market. Thus, concentration does not impact all markets in the same way. Comparing cyclical and open system accounts of the effects of concentration has shown that diversity and innovation are impacted not only by the structure of the market but by the organizational structures and competitive strategies of firms and individuals as well.

Chapter Five

CONCLUSION

In this study I have viewed Elvis Presley’s early rise to stardom as emblematic of revolutionary cultural and aesthetic changes originating from the popular music industry in the years after World War II. I have viewed this period collectively as what Middleton termed the “pop culture moment.”¹ From this moment I have recognized two overarching shifts in the production system for mainstream popular music: first, a wholesale move from the written/mechanical mode of production of the Tin Pan Alley song tradition (i.e., sheet music and the piano) to electronic modes of production and dissemination (i.e., records and radio), and, second, a trend toward democratization, which granted working-class amateurs and musical illiterates access to the production system for mainstream popular music. These new relationships of production, in turn, translated into greater diversity of popular music on the market, making more music accessible to the American audience through the mass media formats of records and radio.

A key aspect of increasing diversity during the pop culture moment was the growing prominence of black and black-inspired musical influences in mainstream popular music programming. The catalyst for this shift was the national emergence of rock ‘n’ roll. That the central figure of this aesthetic and cultural movement, Elvis, was himself white has been a continued subject of controversy. In academic studies and informal discourse alike, he has alternately been lionized as rock ‘n’ roll’s first and greatest hero and vilified as a cultural thief. In light of these widely varying viewpoints, in the introduction

of this study I posed three hypothetical questions: Was rock ‘n’ roll a black or white creation? Should it be perceived as the result of genuine acculturation and innovation or of stylistic plagiarism by whites copying blacks? Were Elvis and Phillips sympathetic toward the music of black Americans, or did they just cash in? Questions of this type are, no doubt, valid as practices associated with rock ‘n’ roll bring issues of race, exploitation, and hegemony in the music industry into sharp relief. Without intending to undermine the validity of such questions, my analysis has intentionally avoided confronting them directly. I have instead attempted to break down the dialectical view of “white” and “black” music in twentieth-century commercial and folk music on which such questions are based. This has been accomplished through examining the processes, practices, and channels that separated black and white musical traditions, as well as those that brought them together, during the rock ‘n’ roll explosion. In doing so, I have demonstrated ways in which race was defined, acted out, and made manifest in the production practices for mainstream popular music and in day-to-day life in the Jim Crow South. In this manner I have treated race as a construction rather than an innate musical or social trait while, nonetheless, showing the direct and tangible ways that the American construction of race fundamentally shaped the dominant aesthetic of popular music.

I have highlighted major innovations that Elvis’s seminal Sun recordings represent. As outlined in Chapter Two, these were achieved by extending preexisting principles and practices from white, black, written, and oral traditions through an experimental approach to the studio process, which took advantage of specific properties of the medium—magnetic tape recording—and of the private environment of the studio space. These resulted in a novel recombination of white pop, rhythm and blues, and hillbilly
music that came to be known as “rockabilly.” While the mainstream commercial viability of rockabilly was limited to the second half of the 1950s, innovations in the studio approach originating with Elvis’s Sun sessions served as an indispensable model for the creative process for popular music going forward.

As significant as Elvis, Moore, Black, and Phillips’s innovations at Sun were, my analysis discounts the notion that massive cultural shifts, such as those of the pop culture moment, may be attributed solely to a gifted individual (e.g., Elvis or Sam Phillips) or to a single innovative firm (e.g., Sun). On the contrary, an undeniable element in Elvis’s explosive commercial success was his being “at the right place at the right time.” Along this line Peterson posed the question, “What if the year had been 1948 rather than 1954?” Speculating as to the answer to this, Peterson posited: “Likely this strikingly handsome mama’s boy of 1948 would have never 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.”Thus, the early trajectory of Elvis’s musical career must be understood within a wider historical framework. Therefore, I have employed Peterson’s six-facet production of culture perspective model to situate Elvis’s early career within the context of broader socioeconomic, technological, political, and social shifts affecting the popular music industry and American society in the postwar South. Doing so, I have shown how such factors shaped specific reward systems and industry structures within the system of production for popular music, which aligned in such a way as to propel Elvis to the center of the national musical and cultural revolution ignited by rock ‘n’ roll.

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Thus, as my analysis refutes the “individual genius” explanation as an adequate account for the transformations of the pop culture moment, it likewise discounts the notion that the “culture industry” may single-handedly dictate the nature of cultural products solely through control of the market. Although I have delineated the six individual facets of production, I have emphasized the interplay among these elements rather than attempting to determine any fixed hierarchy of influence among social, creative, political, or economic factors. This illustrates the fluidity of the relationship among influences on the creative and institutional sides of the production process, i.e., between “industry” and “culture.” As I demonstrated in Chapter Three, for instance, the ascendence of black radio was in large part due to shifts originating on the institutional level. It was a combination of factors—FCC deregulation and resultant market fragmentation, the increased buying power of the black population, and changing patterns of record distribution—that made black rhythm and blues records a profitable music resource for Southern independent radio broadcasters and brought black artists to the airwaves. Black radio formats, in turn, provided a vital channel for cultural exchange, bypassing physical and social constructs of segregation in the Jim Crow South, which, in turn, helped to grow the popularity of black programming with young whites.

As this scenario demonstrates how institutional factors may impact changes on the societal level, analysis in Chapter Four, conversely, demonstrates how shifts originating on the “cultural” side may also compel shifts on the institutional level. This is evident in the demise of covering. While throughout the 1930s and 1940s covering was the primary strategy of market control for the big-four major labels, the practice became obsolete in large part because of aesthetic innovations by the postwar independents. This
was owed to the fact that the experimental aesthetic of small hillbilly and rhythm and blues labels was not easily copied by the rosters of musicians and producers through their standardized, conventionalized production methods. This development proved a key factor in opening up the national market to small independent firms that had previously been easily excluded from the market by the dominance of major labels.

In light of such examples, broad questions formerly posed concerning the relationship between culture and industry—Do audiences “like what they hear?” (i.e., are force fed) or do they “hear what they like?” (i.e., audience tastes dictate the nature of cultural products)—become largely irrelevant. Rather, my analysis has shown no fixed power relationship between elements on the “creative” side of production with those on the “institutional” side. While at times institutional factors may predominate, the power dynamics between elements on the institutional level and those on the cultural or societal level exist in a constant state of negotiation and flux.

Similarly, the historical facts surrounding the emergence of Elvis and rock ‘n’ roll discredit the view of either the “audience” or the “industry” as monolithic entities. As I have shown, the popular music industry and the audience are comprised of a varied collection of producers and consumers often with conflicting interests, goals, and tastes. Regarding the industry, as highlighted in Chapter Three, the commercial field of popular music was comprised of multiple factions, including publishers, small and large broadcasters, small and large recording firms, musician’s unions, and independent individuals. These parties, moreover, were frequently in fierce and direct competition over market access, over control of industry resources, and for profits from popular music sales. In terms of the audience for popular music, examination of the mainstream market in Chap-
ter Four gives strong evidence that the tastes of the “mass” public were, in fact, considerably wider than what was available from national media outlets. Furthermore, it shows that audience tastes may shift, sometimes rapidly, and that this may occur due to factors outside of the control of firms that dominate the market. Therefore, rather than focusing on these macro-level issues, following Peterson’s example, I have instead sought to illuminate the way individuals may move among power roles and to uncover institutional barriers that prevent or inhibit them from doing so. This has resulted in my emphasis on the importance of creativity, agency, and contestation in the creation and institutionalization of new cultural practices.

Insofar as possible, I have attempted to avoid value judgments as to whether aesthetic trends under consideration were, or were not, desirable. In my analysis I have, however, generally viewed the transformations of the pop culture moment as, on the whole, “good” for increasing the diversity of mainstream programming from the narrow Tin Pan Alley aesthetic. I have also generally treated the pop culture moment as beneficial from a social standpoint for increasing accessibility of musical production for amateurs, musical illiterates, blacks, and members of other ethnic minorities who had previously been excluded from the mainstream recording and radio industry. As illustrated in Chapter Four, nonetheless, increasing diversity in the mainstream popular music market during and after the pop culture moment was in large part due to major conglomerates’ strategy of incorporating smaller labels in order to control the market. Therefore, this brings up the issue of hegemony, which has not been considered directly in this study. Likewise, instances of commercial exploitation of creative individuals also have not been

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considered directly. While I have emphasized the greater access to the mainstream market afforded to black musicians during the pop culture moment, I acknowledge that black musicians and writers were particular targets for commercial exploitation in the postwar popular music industry. Furthermore, considering the American social and political climate at the time, I speculate that if Elvis had, in fact, been black, his ascent in the mainstream industry would likely have been less than what it was. Yet, rather than precluding research of hegemonic and exploitative practices by highlighting specific mechanisms and strategies by which creators were excluded or incorporated into the production institutions, I have provided a resource for scholars undertaking such lines of critical inquiry.

My study—with its focus on one of popular music’s most influential and controversial figures—has shown the importance of examining the emergence of new cultural practices in detailed historical context. I have illustrated the vast complexity of institutional and individual relationships within commercial mass media systems and have revealed the role of economic, political, social, and cultural factors in shaping the revolutionary transformations of the pop culture moment. Tackling such a broad scope of factors, I have incorporated materials and methods from an array of disciplines, ranging from cultural sociology and industrial market theory to musicology and aesthetics. To the degree to which I have been effective in this task, this approach has demonstrated the usefulness of the production of culture perspective in providing a vital analytical bridge among viewpoints from diverse disciplines and theoretical orientations.
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