

Rock 'n' Roll: Cars, Convergence and Culture

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Chapter 1

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Introduction

In traditional narratives of American cultural history, the period from 1955 to 1965 is represented as one of 'newness.' Depictions of this period, in both academic and popular explorations, draw attention to phenomena seen to result from post-war social, economic and cultural change: the so-called 'rise of the teenager,' the creation of rock 'n' roll, the advent of the transistor radio, and the central importance of the car. In films such as *American Graffiti* (Cuppola, Kurtz and Lucas 1973), ideas of technology, mobility and teen culture are combined to give us the representations of the period. Teenagers are seen in custom cars – so-called 'hot rods' – cruising around town, with music pouring from the radio. This 'rock 'n' roll moment,' captured for California, 1962, by *American Graffiti*, is one of display and of consumption, of music and of culture. Yet none of these cultural practices and technologies was genuinely new. The association of car customization and teenagers had a longer history, the radio and the car had been linked from at least the 1920s and cars had been a theme of songs since the nineteenth century. Indeed, when we examine these practices and technologies more closely, the continuities appear more important than the idea that this was a period of time in which a major disruption in culture occurred. In what follows, therefore, we will explore the relationship in the US between cars, radio and music in the decade between 1955 and 1965.

We will present these objects, and the cultural practices which connect them, as the end result of a gradual convergence of mobility and entertainment during the first half of the twentieth century. We will suggest that the particular importance accorded to this moment of rock 'n' roll results not from 'newness' but from the way in which the visual and auditory 'image' of these disparate activities (cars, radios and music) form a coherent set of meanings over the decade from 1955. Most importantly, we will explore how new culture was made out of the elements of US commercial culture, and the way that the commercial culture took them back into mass production in the early 1960s.

As we have already indicated, there are a variety of representations of this era within later media texts and popular culture. In addition, there are several very useful academic and popular historical investigations of the precursors to the cultural practices upon which we focus here. Intriguingly, though, few have attempted to understand how they come together in what anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) termed 'bricolage': the re-use of materials and practices for the solution of new cultural dilemmas. In this chapter, then, we use some of the eulogizing scenes woven throughout the narrative of *American Graffiti* to stimulate our investigation, and explore existing scholarship on the history of the individual strands of this culture in order to draw together the sophisticated ways in which cars, radio, and mobile music have converged into a meaningful culture.

Cars

George Lucas's *American Graffiti* opens to the soundtrack of Bill Hayley's 'Rock Around the Clock' and the arrival of three of the central characters at Mel's Drive-In. They use different modes of transport. The cool of the '58 Impala is evidently set against the utility of the motor scooter and Citroen CV. Cars, therefore, feature centrally in the narrative of the film, not as modes of functional transport, but as symbols of youth, mobility and competition. The car is presented as the means through which the other aspects of youth culture are articulated: music, relationships, coming of age.

This connection of cars to youth culture, however, is much older than the 1950s or 1960s. In fact, as early as the late 1920s, cars had become the technological innovation most identified with young people in films, songs and novels (Ides 2009, p. 110). From the mid-1930s US manufacturers were advertising cars “that might appeal to younger drivers” (Best 2006, p. 11). The ownership and widespread use of cars by the young resulted, primarily, from a massive increase in the production of cars and the decrease in their price following the introduction of the Model-T Ford in 1908. Adjusted for inflation, between 1909 and 1925, the price of a new Model-T fell in real terms by 82% (Ides 2009, p. 122) creating both the broad distribution of *new* cars and a burgeoning market in *used* cars. It was this latter market that was the principle source of youth car ownership and by the mid-1930s, in Los Angeles at least, middle-class high school students were driving to school (Ides 2009, p. 102, 123). Ford’s mass production model also incorporated consistent and widely available car parts. These factors were vital to the increasingly popular practice of car modification: or ‘hot rodding,’ as it came to be known.

Southern California - and particularly Los Angeles - was central to the development of hot-rodding practices (Luckso 2008, p. 65-6, 69), in part due to the increasingly distributed nature of the LA urban environment, both driving, and being driven by, huge growth in car usage. While the population of LA roughly doubled between 1919 and 1929, car registration in the area more than quintupled (Flink 1990, p. 143). By the end of the 1920s, the practice of altering production cars for speed was well-established throughout the USA. In southern California, competitive racing took place along dry lakebeds, a practice that rapidly grew in perceived legitimacy and formalization. First appearing in the area in the 1920s, car clubs were initially focused on adult hobbyists, but became more youth-orientated during the 1930s, and in many cases were amalgamated into sanctioned racing and timing associations (Ides 2009, p. 102, 123-4; Moorhouse 1986, p. 84). Although these lakes were commandeered by the military during World War 2, lakebed racing resumed after the war, with timing associations continuing to lend the practice an air of credibility and, increasingly, respectability.

The 'hot-rod problem'

There is, however, more to this picture. *American Graffiti*, significantly, does not show a hot rod involved in a lakebed race; rather, the race presented in the film takes place on a road. The trend of increasing access to cars had continued throughout the 1930s as production volumes grew, but some soon-familiar, car-related problems increased in parallel: high speed road driving and - as we see in the film - street racing. While marking a departure from the practices of many of those who might have considered themselves 'genuine' hot rodders, by the 1960s street racing was not only a well-established phenomenon, but seen as a serious problem, strongly associated with youthful delinquency. Even as early as 1913, records show that 115 juveniles were arrested in LA in one year for joy-riding (Moorhouse 1991, p. 29). It is clear that speeding was an issue throughout the 1920s and '30s. In the 1940s, teen drivers - "wild-eyed kids in hopped-up jalopies" - were seen as a major social problem across the US, and a new term, 'teenicide,' was coined to describe the perceived proclivity of teens to die in car accidents (Moorhouse 1991, p. 29, 31, 35). Many street races took place at night, after sanctioned club meetings, leading one Los Angeles police captain to refer to them as "suicide clubs of midnight owls" (Ides 2009, p. 135-6).

Although figures from California for 1949 suggest the vehicle accident rate among under 18s was well above average, in actual fact there were few accidents. The discourse of delinquency remained strong, meaning those accidents that did occur were sensationalized (Moorhouse 1991, p. 29, 35; Ides 2009, p. 136). In some cases, any and every car driven by a teenager was labeled as a hot rod (Ides 2009: 138), and Ben Shackleford draws our attention to an indicative 1949 article in *Life* magazine, which decried 'The "Hot-Rod" Problem' with the byline "Teen-agers organize to experiment with mechanized suicide" (Shackleford 2004, p. 37; 'The 'hot-rod' problem,' p. 122-124). By the late 1940s, 'hot rod' was used to refer to "a highly visible, relatively affluent, teenage lifestyle which seemed to turn on drive-ins, noise, jalopies held together with chewing gum and dangerous driving on public highways" (Moorhouse 1991, p. 33). These negative associations created consternation among self-proclaimed genuine hot rodders - the (by this point often older) devotees of lakebed racing - and they sought to coax street racers back to the relative safety of

sanctioned speed events. In addition, the threat of state legislation in California that could affect all hot rodding and racing activity drove a vigorous attempt to present lakebed races as a sober, respectable and self-regulating sport, distinctly at odds with the practices vilified by the press (Moorhouse 1991, p. 32-41).

Fashion

By the mid-1950s there was already a well-established association between cars, high-speed driving and teenagers. So what was actually happening between 1955 and 1965, in the rock 'n' roll moment? In terms of cars, we can start to understand this period through the meaning of the term hot rod. If practices here were not new, the terminology certainly appears to have been. 'Hot rod' was not an expression in use among lakebed racers of the 1930s, and *Life* magazine, in 1945 - which used the term so confidently only 4 years later - felt the need to provide a definition for its readers (Moorhouse 1986, p. 83, 86-7). Although it appears to have been employed at first as a belittling contraction of 'hot roadster' (Luckso 2008, p. 10, 66-7), by the end of the 1940s 'hot rod' was in wide circulation.

Significantly, in 1948, self-identifying usage appeared in the form of *Hot Rod* magazine, launched in January of that year by a group of lake racing enthusiasts (Moorhouse 1986, p. 84). This magazine was aimed at the 'genuine' hot rodders to whom we've already alluded; those who defined themselves in terms of the hard work and innovative engineering they performed on their cars. The first issue dismissed those who didn't espouse this ethic and instead settled simply for the appearance of speed as 'shot rodders,' and the magazine explicitly rejected the construction of hot rodding that had become a media commonplace (Moorhouse 1986, p. 89). Street racers were labeled as 'squirrels,' journalists were castigated when they "presented these idiots as if they were true hot rodders," and the editor of issue two suggested that 'hot rod' was among "the most misused of words" (Moorhouse 1991, p. 40-1). Importantly, these struggles for definition reflected a divide that became increasingly significant into the 1950s: between speed and style, between *being* fast and *looking* fast.

Street racing survived in the years of the Second World War through impromptu drag meets and improvised solutions to fuel restrictions (Moorhouse 1991, p. 31-2). In the years that followed, cars had become more varied in their mechanics, offering a diversity that changed the nature of hot rodding practices. Ford's shift to interchangeable parts in the early part of the 1930s, along with the decreasing cost of cars and large stock of older models, made hot rodding a hobby accessible to a broad range of middle and working class youth (Ides 2009, p. 124). 1930s Fords, prominent among them the *Little Deuce Coupe* of Beach Boys fame, were particularly prized as a basis for hot rod work. In *American Graffiti*, a yellow hot rod version is driven by John Milner, a key character in the film who represents the eternal youth that main characters are reluctantly leaving behind. However, the diverse mechanics of the 1950s meant that in reality parts were harder to get. By that point, cars of the '30s were two decades old and becoming costly to purchase and modify (Ides 2009, p. 117). Although the low-cost cars of the 1930s democratized what had initially been a middle class pursuit and changed it into something that cut across society, by the 1950s 'genuine' hot rodding once again became an activity in which only upper middle classes could afford to indulge. Before the 1920s speed had generally belonged only to the wealthy. The increasing ownership of fast cars by the working classes thereafter contested that privilege. And by the 1950s, 'fast cars' didn't have to mean modified cars. The term could also include new ones.

Perhaps the most significant change apparent in the 1950s was the engagement of mass producers and mass culture with the hot rod phenomenon. For a start, Detroit manufacturers started to draw on the expertise within the hot rodding community, offering scholarships to the winners of organized races on the Utah salt flats (Shackleford 2004, p. 39-40) and using 'horsepower tricks' to offer production cars with more powerful engines, capable of higher speeds (Luckso 2008, p. 106). Appropriating the cachet of the process itself, they also began to sell 'customized' models of new cars (Shackleford 2004, p. 43). At the start of our rock 'n' roll moment in 1955, the Dodge D-500 was launched, and controversially described by *Hot Rod* magazine as a "production line hot rod" (Moorhouse 1986, p. 91). In the years that followed, 'muscle cars' like that one, the Chrysler C-300, and the AMC Rebel, also became very popular.

Mainstream auto manufacturers rapidly responded to the adornment practices pursued by hot rodders. Most visibly, they followed the trend of adding chrome parts to their production cars. Even those who could not afford, or did not want, a road-racing car, could therefore reproduce the symbols of speed and rebellion in their showroom purchases. Of course, driven by a determination to differentiate themselves, the hot rodders (and then the more youthful shot rodders) removed the chrome (Shackleford 2004, p. 50). In the next production generation, car manufacturers followed suit, at which point hot rodders added it once again in an ongoing cycle of “cultural participation and creativity within mass consumerism” (Ides 2009, p. 145, paraphrasing Balsley 1950). Interestingly, both the black '55 Chevy and the yellow '32 Deuce Coupe dueling in *American Graffiti's* road race sported the same amount of chrome on their wheels, and the Chevy kept its production chromed bumpers.

Between 1955 and 1965, then, the car was consolidated not only in its long-term role as an aspect of youth culture, but also as a fashion item. In the aftermath of World War 2, cars were increasingly seen as short-lived and made to be replaced readily by new models. Car *modifiers* led the fashion and car *companies* followed, but the majority of people consumed the products manufactured *en masse* by the Detroit factories. The custom car was appropriated and re-appropriated in turn.

Radio

If the story of the cars in our imagined rock 'n' roll moment is not as simple as we might expect, the same holds true for the radios which they carried. In *American Graffiti* the radio appears - as a major signifier and narrative device - almost as immediately in the film as the cars. After the main characters are introduced, Lucas blurs non-diegetic and diegetic music: the rock 'n' roll title soundtrack morphs into the sound of music on the car radios, and then to the announcements of radio DJ Wolfman Jack. The mobility of people and music in the film is central to both its iconography and story. At almost any place where a car is key to a scene, music, and music on radio in particular, is there as well.

The first transistor radios appeared in the mid-1950s (Braun and Macdonald 1978, p. 17; Partner 1999, p. 193-8), following the perfection of the transistor itself at the end of the previous decade. Perhaps as a consequence, there is a tendency to assume that it was the development of the transistor that allowed radios to become portable, making radio listening a mobile phenomenon that was exploited in turn by a new youth culture. Certainly, transistors used less power, were more rugged, and smaller than the valves/vacuum tubes that preceded them, and they were easier to mass produce (Tilton 1971, p. 16-7; Partner 1999, p. 203-5). All those qualities contributed to a greater culture of mobility. But, although they may not always have been like the highly portable pocket radios of the 1960s, radio receivers had been mobile for most of their history.

Portable listening devices existed long before the 1950s. Cars had radios from the start of auto mass production. Portable radios, and radios in cars, were far from unusual in the mid-1920s; low power and small valves, and even pocket radios that used them, could be found in the late 1930s (Schiffer 1991, p. 161-71). By 1946, nearly 40% of the 9 million US cars had radios. By 1955 most radio receivers were sold in cars, and by 1958 half the population was listening in their cars. Five years later, in 1963, 60% of the 50 million cars in circulation had radios (Douglas 1999, p. 226; Gomery 2008, p. 144). Before 1955, therefore, radio listening was predominantly static and domestic, not because radio listening technology wasn't portable but because radio listening was driven by a domestic, cultural imperative: the main audience was the domestic family unit at leisure. Up until 1955, domestic listeners enjoyed evening broadcasts of programming that we would recognize from contemporary television: dramas, variety, quizzes, and chat shows.

Since the mid-1930s, radio broadcasting had been dominated by state monopolies in most European nations and by oligopolies in the USA. American radio was based upon a network system. Entertainment programmes were made in New York and distributed to local broadcasters. There was some daytime broadcasting, mainly targeted at women, and it is from here that we get the term 'soap opera': daytime melodrama sponsored by washing soap manufacturers for those involved in domestic labour. However, in the early 1950s television took radio's domestic family audience. The identification

and attraction of new radio audiences became important. Daytime housewife listeners were far more important than they had previously been, and a previously ignored audience of poor urban blacks and whites who couldn't afford television suddenly became extremely attractive (Rothenbuhler and McCourt 2002; Barlow 1999).

Radio and new listeners as markets

One particularly crucial market in the period under consideration was that of commuting workers, who were seen as captive audiences for radio broadcasters. It was commuters who bought the new, mass-produced cars and initiated the widespread installation of radios in them. By 1955, not only were most new radios produced for cars; the vast majority (83%) of new cars also had radios (cited in Gomery 2008, p. 144). As the radio networks moved their attention and their shows to television, a new generation of independent radio stations looked for a new, cheap form of programming. That form was based around recorded music. Music radio increasingly moved from blocks of programmes to what Todd Stortz, the 'father' of Top 40 radio, called a 'total station sound' (Rothenbuhler and McCourt 2004) - the emphasis here was on branding a station rather than a single programme. The Top 40 format arrived before rock 'n' roll radio, and even pre-dated the targeting of radio programmes at young listeners; at this time it became the dominant way of organizing the new music as a radio form, and ultimately the means through which radio moved from a predominantly domestic to a predominantly mobile medium. Radio station output became a single rolling experience into which listeners were assumed to dip for a fixed, and usually short, period of time. However, this impulse towards reshaping owed more to the need to find new audiences to replace those taken away by the newly prevalent television, and the need to drive down costs in an environment where traditional radio fare was expensive to produce. In the US at least, records were provided to radio stations for free, as radio served as their main channel of promotion. Radio's use of sound as its medium of communication also made music-based programmes an ideal accompaniment for housework and driving.

From the mid-1950s, radio was therefore structured around a series of 'imagined listeners.' The first was the industrial worker, primarily in his or her role as the commuter who determined the breakfast and drive times. The second was the middle-class housewife, seeking entertainment to underwrite her domestic chores, perhaps supplemented by those workers who were allowed radios in the paid workplace. These audiences are largely forgotten in contemporary recreations of the rock 'n' roll era. Primacy is instead given to the role that radio played in the leisure times of a third group of listeners: the young. This audience reflected a time of post-war urban prosperity in America, a moment when television sets became more affordable and teenagers came into their own as a viable consumer market capable of attracting advertisers. *The Teenage Consumer* - to use Mark Abrams' seminal 1959 phrase - could, in the evening, take over both the car and the radio because the housewife and commuter came together at home in front of the TV. It was here, around youth, then, that the car, radio and rock 'n' roll converged.

Radio's new industrial organization

At the centre of the new form of music radio programming was the sense of a personal relationship with listeners, primarily articulated through the talk of the DJ. As we have noted, *American Graffiti* celebrates early 1960s DJ Wolfman Jack, but it is his tamer contemporary Alan Freed who was best known as the link between the new radio programming and American teenagers (Miller 1999, 57 - 61; Jackson 1995). Freed played black music to white audiences and, from 1954, used black slang for sex in the title of his radio show at WINS in New York: *Moon Dog's Rock 'n' Roll Party*. His listeners came to think of the term 'rock 'n' roll' as descriptive of the music. Freed adopted the style of black radio presenters for his audience just as much as he adopted the hits of the black community to play for youngsters. In this, he was a classic bricoleur, making new meanings out of diverse cultural resources. And by choosing *this* music, played on *this* radio station, Freed's audiences could publicly express their affiliation, and form bonds with likeminded others. Such developments in music consumption were echoed in the adoption - by white teenagers - of other elements of culture from their

segregated black peers: the jukebox, from the black juke joint, and the dances which drove the dance fads that followed rock 'n' roll (Wall 2006).

While it was Freed and the Wolfman who generally received credit for this musical shift, a deeper understanding is now available to us through the consideration of two other radio stations: WDIA in Memphis and WJR in Detroit. They were two of the burgeoning independent radio stations in the US during the remaking of its radio landscape between 1945 and 1965. As we have already suggested, independent stations were central to the transformation. During this period, the number of stations grew enormously, from approximately 1,000 at the end of World War II to 4,000 by the end of our period of study. Most of this increase was composed of independent stations. While few had existed in 1945, there were over 2,700 by 1965 (Sterling 1984, p. 12).

WDIA in Memphis and WJR in Detroit shared similarities with hundreds of other stations in the US at the time, but they also represent quite clear examples of polar positions within US radio. Contrasting them reveals something of the important relationship between the car, radio and mobile music that we have set out in this chapter. WDIA was the first US radio station to consistently play black music, and its focus on a regional black audience grew from single programmes in the late 1940s to a whole station format in the mid 1950s (Cantor 1992). Although white-owned from its inception, the station played a significant part in the development of the African American community and the civil rights movement well into the 1970s (Ward 2004). But WDIA in the mid-1950s also represents a significant moment of cultural exchange between black and white Americans, and in this moment we can understand more clearly that rock n roll owes its origins to US stations like WDIA. It is no coincidence that so many of the future white rock 'n' roll artists grew up in Memphis, including the one they called the 'king of rock 'n' roll': Elvis Presley. Greil Marcus has suggested that Presley's most important characteristic was 'not his ability to imitate a black blues singer, but the nerve to cross the borders he had been born to respect' (Marcus 1975, p.155). Presley grew up listening to WDIA and he was therefore one of the first working class white Americans to hear large amounts of black R&B while staying broadly within his own white

community. He was able to imitate the black blues singer because he could hear the singer in a land of racist physical separation, but he had the nerve to cross musical boundaries of ethnicity because it was meaningful for a young post-war working class American to do so. As we discuss in the next section, engaging with black music was an important statement of rebellion.

WDIA has a central place in the development of black music in the USA. Known throughout Southern states as the 'Mother Station of the Negroes' (Guralnick 1986), WDIA started with mixed programming featuring hillbilly music for white listeners as well as output specifically targeting black listeners, and this probably acted as the link to the R&B programming for Presley and his peers. It was also the station that Rufus Thomas and Jim Stewart worked for in different capacities. Thomas was a central character in the development of R&B and 1960s Soul in the Southern states. He worked as a DJ on WDIA, as MC at the Handy Theatre for the Amateur nights where BB King and Bobby Bland got started, and became a recording artist on Stax records along with his daughter Carla. Stewart started off as a fiddle player in hillbilly bands, playing at WDIA before becoming a music entrepreneur, record shop owner, and eventually setting up Stax records with his sister Estelle Axton in the early 1960s (Bowman 1997).

By contrast WJR in Detroit emerged from a very different political pole. The station played host to the earliest broadcasts of the populist anti-semitic, Charles Coughlin, and was owned by George A. Richards, who by the mid-1950s combined attempts at systematic interference in the national democratic process and virulent anti-semitism with cross promotion of his football club and radio interests (Barnouw 1968, p. 44, 223). Equally, though, WJR represented one of the stations actively trying to attract car commuting listeners. As the 1966 promotional film *WJR: One of a Kind* clearly demonstrates, during the decade under consideration here the station presents commuters and housewives as its most important listeners (Quitney 2012). Recordings of its mid-1950s broadcasts reveal its sound and audience address could not have been more different from that of WDIA (Vintagetvs 2008). Like the Memphis station it increasingly relied on recorded music, but for the Detroit station it was light orchestrated versions of country forms, show hits from Doris Day,

and big band stomps that predominated. The music was punctuated with gentle homilies to drivers to be careful in the rain. WJR, at the centre of the US auto industry and one of the first suburban commuter systems, is generally credited with the invention of drive-time music programming, interweaving popular music and local traffic information to directly serve commuters as the audience segment became more important.

Music

At the heart of these discussions is, of course, the cultural activity of consuming music. An important aspect of the story of the rock 'n' roll moment is the perception that 1955 was the year in which rock 'n' roll came into existence. Of all elements of the picture, this is perhaps the best known, but is no less mythologised for that. Certainly 1955 was a seminal year for rock 'n' roll music releases. It is noteworthy that *American Graffiti*, although set in the early 1960s, opens with Bill Haley's 'Rock Around The Clock,' one of the defining records of rock 'n' roll and a recording widely used to index the birth of teenage culture. Musically, 'Rock Around The Clock' was ostensibly a hillbilly western swing version of a blues structure, with a lyric that draws upon African American slang about sexual longevity. In a sense, rock 'n' roll itself can be understood as a process of customisation within mainstream American popular music. Both R&B and hillbilly represented cultures at the margins of American society; they were first customised by, then for, young mainstream white Americans. It would not be long until music repeated the pattern of car customisation and was re-appropriated by mainstream Tin Pan Alley pop. In exactly the same way that the vigour and innovation of WDIA's black programming was appropriated by DJs like Alan Freed, his rock 'n' roll party was soon re-appropriated by independent radio's Top 40 programming.

The way that *American Graffiti* uses music is particularly interesting. It pervades the film. In one scene it is centre stage in a live show, but mostly it is recorded music that predominates, emanating from the radio station and blasting from car radios. In one of the best scenes, record collecting becomes the basis of an impassioned monologue.

The soundtrack record (Various Artists 1973) collected 41 of the recordings featured in the film and reproduced the success of its cinematic release by selling over 3 million copies. It achieved a top 10 placement in sales charts for 1973. The earliest recording was 'Rock Around The Clock,' with other tracks covering '50s R&B and doo wop, and everything from rock 'n' roll to the pop of the Beach Boys and proto soul instrumentals of Booker T and the MGs. The largest number of tracks came from the early 1970s retro rock 'n' roll band Flash Cadillac and the Continental Kids. The importance of cars within the mythologized youth culture of the late 1950s and early 1960s is signaled by the name that the latter group took to identify its historical position. The group performed the role of live hop group Herbie and the Heartbeats in the film.

Two artists seem conspicuously absent from the film's musical line-up. Chuck Berry's 'Maybellene' was probably as important as 'Rock Around The Clock' in establishing the sound we usually understand as rock 'n' roll, and there are no records from Elvis Presley at all. Sean Cubitt (1984, p. 209) has described 'Maybellene' as a "saga of the eroticised automobile," with its "cinematic car-chase lyric." In a paean to the masculinised chase after sex and speed, Berry tells us the story of how his Ford V8 - a popular model among post-war hot rodders (Luckso 2008, p. 67) - catches-up with Maybellene's Coup-de-Ville. However, the lyrical theme of capture is somewhat undermined by a musical structure in which the song form is left unresolved, and as the track fades out we are left in a perpetual present of unending movement. If 'Maybellene' was ostensibly R&B music with a lyric about white youthful concerns with cars and sex, Haley and Presley represent a white customisation of black musical and verbal forms. This cultural miscegenation presages the dominant 1960s popular music that appealed to both black and white Americans; a form that Brian Ward (1998) has named 'bi-racial pop.' While rock 'n' roll has its roots in black and white music forms, this fusion appealed to both black and white teenagers. Berry, Presley, and to a lesser extent Haley, sold across communities to such an extent that the separate R&B and pop music charts were merged in 1963 (Wall 2013, p. 88), and new forms of popular music associated with dance fads emerged in the early 1960s (see Wall). It is interesting to note that dance fad records like Chubby Checker's 'The Twist' from 1960 are completely missing from *American Graffiti*, even though they would have

dominated the output of music radio in the year in which the film is set.

Bi-racial pop was an important cultural and economic phenomenon. African Americans could believe that the cultural and musical fusions represented by records like Presley's 'That's All Right' were the precursor to a more integrated future, but they also allowed Southern whites to love and imitate black music without having to know blacks. Presley spent the first years of his career fully within the separate C&W music industry of live venues, radio programmes and record companies, distributors and retailers, but his appeal was far greater than the usual demographics of this market. His first single was successful in both country and black R&B charts, and his appeal was strong among the newly affluent youth, not just locally in Memphis, but across America. It was also a music that therefore functioned at the heart of a new, emerging youth radio and a Top 40 increasingly dominated by the tastes of young buyers.

It was not only a convergence of musical taste that made this music so universal, however, but also a convergence of themes. As 'Maybellene' shows, ideas of cars and racing were there at the outset of rock 'n' roll, but they were also a theme in pre rock 'n' roll R&B. 1951's 'Rocket 88,' first credited to Jackie Brenston and covered in the same year by Bill Haley, celebrates the cruiser Oldsmobile 88. It owes something in its musical form to Jimmy Liggins 'Cadillac Boogie' song from 1947, and sits comfortably with the far more obscure 1949 recording 'Rocket 88 Boogie' by Pete Johnson. Given that the Brenston record is often cited as the first rock 'n' roll record because of its guitar sound and rhythmic patterns (see, for instance, Dahl n.d.), its important place in articulating the combined themes of automotive technology and sexual allure that were to reverberate through rock 'n' roll culture seems to have been lost in the telling of pop culture's history. Again, though, these pre-occupations were far from new. The automobile had featured in popular music from at least 1899, when the promotional song 'The Studebaker March' was released, and as the production and presence of cars increased, music kept pace. Between 1905 and 1908, more than 120 songs about automobiles were released and, while largely centred on romantic themes, music went on to signal the prominence of the Ford in American culture following the release of the Model T. Indeed, more than 60 songs

were written about Ford (either the car or Henry Ford himself) between 1908 and 1940 (Heitmann 2009, p. 26-7). Songs about cars continued to be produced in various musical genres, but were particularly popular in country music, and Arkie Shibley's *Hot Rod Race*, recorded in 1950, is sometimes credited with introducing songs about racing to the fold.

It is in the rock 'n' roll moment, then, that these musical threads were drawn together, by rock 'n' roll tracks which highlighted cars as part of teenage culture, in their connection with competition through racing, as a locus of romance, and as an icon of freedom and self-determination. Yet these themes were themselves inherited from that earlier music, and in some cases musicians explicitly linked back to earlier work. On the country/hillbilly side, Charlie Ryan's 1955 recording of 'Hot Rod Lincoln' is perhaps demonstrative. An answer song to Shibley's 'Hot Rod Race,' 'Hot Rod Lincoln' took and extended the story of the kid in the "hopped-up Model A," as a rockabilly number which was to become a chart hit in 1960. Continuity from the R&B perspective appears elsewhere, for example in Chuck Berry's repertoire, where among several songs focused on cars we can find the famous 'Route 66.' Although perhaps the best known version, Berry's was not the earliest; the track became an R&B standard, but it was written by white jazz pianist and songwriter Bobby Troup, and first recorded by the Nat King Cole Trio in 1946.

The music-automotive link also established itself strongly in the era of bi-racial pop, especially in the music of Detroit's Motown records, often presented as an application of the processes of the car production line to music production. A curious representation of this link can be found in a television recording of Motown singing group Martha and the Vandellas, who are presented miming to their hit 'Nowhere to Run' while moving through the Mustang production line in Ford's River Rouge Plant. The short film was included in *It's What's Happening, Baby!*, an even more curious attempt to link the bi-racial youth culture to a CBS-US Office of Economic Opportunity joint production which sought to sell the key economic plank of Lyndon B. Johnson's 'Great Society' legislation (see Smith 2001; Coates 2011).

Conclusion

In the period leading up to the rock 'n' roll moment, the cultural objects which composed it had been removed from a mass produced context, altered, and replaced; consumption, and the associated cultural practices, had thus nuanced mass production. At this moment of convergence, niche cultures became mass cultures, shifting across boundaries of age, class, race and gender: fast cars became truly mainstream, marking a final step in the democratization of speed; the focus of radio changed, with the combination of youth-focused music and the top-40 format becoming the dominant form of radio in the US from 1960 onwards; and black music had, of course, become white music. Due in large part to these shifts, the moment of rock 'n' roll was also a moment of moral panic, followed later by a moment of romanticisation. Consistent throughout was the role of commerce: 1955 marked the first time you could go and buy a hot rod, rock 'n' roll music and R&R radio off the shelf. In so doing, young people, and indeed older advocates of the rock 'n' roll lifestyle, were able to express their identity through their consumption activities. Notions of freedom and mobility that had been some of the core drivers of urban culture were given their own teenage version, and the music encultured these romantic dreams. Listening to a particular radio station rapidly became not only a choice but also a statement. And much of this listening took place in and around cars.

We should also take a moment to think further about the history of these icons of the rock 'n' roll moment, as we can perhaps further unpick the mythology of this period. For our understanding, such as it is, is distorted not only by a misleading discourse of newness, but also by other elements in popular depictions of this moment like those seen in *American Graffiti*. Just as the sense of moral panic which arose from the breaking of boundaries and the behaviour of young people in cars was driven by media presentation and not really supported by the evidence at hand, so too was the increasingly romantic image of rock 'n' roll. While the shift in cultural practices from niche to mainstream, the popular access to speed and mobility, the (at least partial) de-racialisation of music, and the reshaping of radio infrastructure all occurred, these were not things which occurred evenly, or in order to tell a happy story about 1955 or 1965. It should not be forgotten that our stopping point - the mass

consumption (and thus mass provision) of rock 'n' roll - was shaped by economic imperatives just as much as it responded to cultural ones. Our mythologised view is both affluent (real hot rods were expensive) and white. In closing, then, we must give some further thought to the rock 'n' roll experience of poorer and non-white consumers.

Cars, clearly, were central to white constructions of the rock 'n' roll moment, and mass-produced 'custom cars' and 'hot rods' allowed access to cars which looked fast but were not necessarily significantly so. Certainly, there seems no sense that genuine hot rods, built for racing on the lakebeds, would be outrun by production equivalents. Thus while the elite ownership of speed had been contested in the 1930s, it was regained, albeit to a much lesser (and arguably irrelevant) extent in the 1950s. The shift in focus of customisation here was, as noted, away from modifications for speed and towards modifications for appearance. One of the most significant styles of such modification was lowriding, the practice of lowering a car's suspension. Originating in the Mexican-American communities of California, possibly in response to their exclusion from status in post-war hot rod culture on ethnic lines (Ides 2009, p. 113-4, 149-50), this form of modification was immensely popular among both non-white and poorer white groups. It was seen by some as a form of protest against class and race divisions, and was clearly used to indicate separateness from a prevailing idea of white, middle class hot rodding (Ides 2009, p. 149-69). Thus, lowriders were driven slowly, to enhance their visibility (Best 2006, p. 31). Within black American culture, this notion of protest was already firmly established, with cars having rapidly become "signs of insubordination, progress and compensatory prestige... savoured in accordance with an aesthetic code that valued movement over fixity and sometimes prized public style over private comfort and security" (Gilroy 2001, p. 94). Thus car consumption in marginalised communities tended, as Ides (2009, p. 150) notes, to emphasise the social aspects of the car, and this was to reject technical modification for aesthetic, and to privilege those elements that were context specific and could not be 'designed in.' These practices thus rejected not only the class and racial segregation of the hot rod scene, but also those elements of mass production that responded to it.

In terms of radio, we see a mass-market solution which targeted poor and black markets as a result of economic pressures, rather than a desire to create specific tailored services: we must also not forget that the principal business of radio is selling audiences for advertising. It is also notable that, with very few exceptions, radio stations were white-owned and DJs were white. While Freed may have adopted the persona of black DJs, it is clear that the architecture of rock 'n' roll radio was determined by the same class of affluent whites who could afford to make hot rods in their spare time. Top 40 as a format, and aggressive station branding, shifted the focus away from more expensive programming, much of which had gone over to television. There is a strong sense that in this romanticised moment, although rock 'n' roll radio was something that many enjoyed, it was produced as a result of a scattershot approach to music airplay which gave a broad range of listeners a service that was just about good enough to make them listen - and thus not necessarily the service they wanted or would have chosen for themselves.

Lastly, we must be wary of assuming that, just because rock 'n' roll radio offered a mix of black and white music, the music that was offered was the music that black audiences would have chosen to listen to had they been more self-determining. Certainly there is ample evidence that, in mainstream rock 'n' roll culture, whites adopted black music and black dances, which were then nuanced through white musical practices. For black audiences, however, there seem to have been competing pressures at work: the mainstreaming of musical styles which black audiences enjoyed was novel and doubtless welcome, but again it is unclear whether or not the amalgamation of musical charts represented a commercial decision to reduce trade in lines of music which had sold in previous years on the basis that rock 'n' roll was, again, just good enough.

A key query here is the extent to which the rock 'n' roll moment - as imagined in film and song - represents an authentic experience, and if so, whose experience it was. Cars in particular were 'public ciphers of celebrity' (Gilroy 2001, p. 94), something recognized by black and white musicians alike, and there is doubtless something to be understood in the way in which cars were inflected as status symbols by celebrities and how this related to the consumption cultures in various segments of society. Did the fact that Chuck Berry sang about

a 1930s Ford in 1955, for example, make a statement about class (by this point, these were expensive) or about race (a hot rodder's car against a Cadillac)?ⁱ Or was it simply a response to the prevailing culture in which Berry found himself? Was Berry here another bricoleur, bringing together cultural symbols from either side of race and class boundaries that defined rock 'n' roll culture even as that culture was seen to transgress them?

Indeed, by occupying a position at the centre of mainstream culture, consumption and production in 1955, we might suggest that, at the very point of its imagined 'creation,' rock 'n' roll ceased to be transgressive and became inauthentic. Certainly there was nothing particularly transgressive or authentic about the purchase of a mass-produced rock 'n' roll lifestyle, however much this might allow you to imitate your heroes from music or film. Yet we can see that these practices of consumption were part of a process of youthful re-appropriation of resources that had traditionally been under adult control. Perhaps, then, the notion of appearance that was so significant in cars was representative of a broader situation in rock 'n' roll. The cultural practices themselves, the spectacular and strongly visual and audible aspects of rock 'n' roll culture were less directly meaningful than we might imagine – they provided the appearance of youthful excess and transgression which distracted onlookers from a much more serious activity at work. This moment of convergence marked two kinds of appropriation: not only were culturally-significant objects created through a cycle of (sub)cultural labour and mass production but, in the background, resources and power were appropriated by a new generation.

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¹ Cadillacs were said to have strong associations with black Americans (see Gilroy 2001, p. 97).