

Popular Culture

MAIN IDEA

Mainstream Americans, as well as the nation's subcultures, embraced new forms of entertainment during the 1950s.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Television and rock 'n' roll, integral parts of the nation's culture today, emerged during the postwar era.

Terms & Names

- mass media
- Federal Communications Commission (FCC)
- beat movement
- rock 'n' roll
- jazz

H. B. Barnum, a 14-year-old saxophone player who later became a music producer, was one of many teenagers in the 1950s drawn to a new style of music that featured hard-driving African-American rhythm and blues. Barnum described the first time he saw the rhythm-and-blues performer Richard Wayne Penniman, better known as Little Richard.

★ A PERSONAL VOICE H. B. BARNUM

“He'd just burst onto the stage from anywhere, and you wouldn't be able to hear anything but the roar of the audience. . . . He'd be on the stage, he'd be off the stage, he'd be jumping and yelling, screaming, whipping the audience on. . . . Then when he finally did hit the piano and just went into di-di-di-di-di-di, you know, well nobody can do that as fast as Richard. It just took everybody by surprise.”

—quoted in *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music*

Born poor, Little Richard wore flashy clothes on stage, curled his hair, and shouted the lyrics to his songs. As one writer observed, “In two minutes [he] used as much energy as an all-night party.” The music he and others performed became a prominent part of the American culture in the 1950s, a time when both mainstream America and those outside it embraced new and innovative forms of entertainment.



▲ Little Richard helped change rhythm and blues into a new musical genre—rock 'n' roll.

New Era of the Mass Media

Compared with other **mass media**—means of communication that reach large audiences—television developed with lightning speed. First widely available in 1948, television had reached 9 percent of American homes by 1950 and 55 percent of homes by 1954. In 1960, almost 90 percent—45 million—of American homes had television sets. Clearly, TV was the entertainment and information marvel of the postwar years.



THE RISE OF TELEVISION Early television sets were small boxes with round screens. Programming was meager, and broadcasts were in black and white. The first regular broadcasts, beginning in 1949, reached only a small part of the East Coast and offered only two hours of programs per week. Post-World War II innovations such as microwave relays, which could transmit television waves over long distances, sent the television industry soaring. By 1956, the **Federal Communications Commission (FCC)**—the government agency that regulates and licenses television, telephone, telegraph, radio, and other communications industries—had allowed 500 new stations to broadcast.

This period of rapid expansion was the “golden age” of television entertainment—and entertainment in the 1950s often meant comedy. Milton Berle attracted huge audiences with *The Texaco Star Theater*, and Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz’s early situation comedy, *I Love Lucy*, began its enormously popular run in 1951.

At the same time, veteran radio broadcaster Edward R. Murrow introduced two innovations: on-the-scene news reporting, with his program, *See It Now* (1951–1958), and interviewing, with *Person to Person* (1953–1960). Westerns, sports events, and original dramas shown on *Playhouse 90* and *Studio One* offered entertainment variety. Children’s programs, such as *The Mickey Mouse Club* and *The Howdy Doody Show*, attracted loyal young fans.

American businesses took advantage of the opportunities offered by the new television industry. Advertising expenditures on TV, which were \$170 million in 1950, reached nearly \$2 billion in 1960.

Sales of *TV Guide*, introduced in 1953, quickly outpaced sales of other magazines. In 1954, the food industry introduced a new convenience item, the frozen TV dinner. Complete, ready-to-heat individual meals on disposable aluminum trays, TV dinners made it easy for people to eat without missing their favorite shows. **A**

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

A How did the emergence of television affect American culture in the 1950s?

HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT

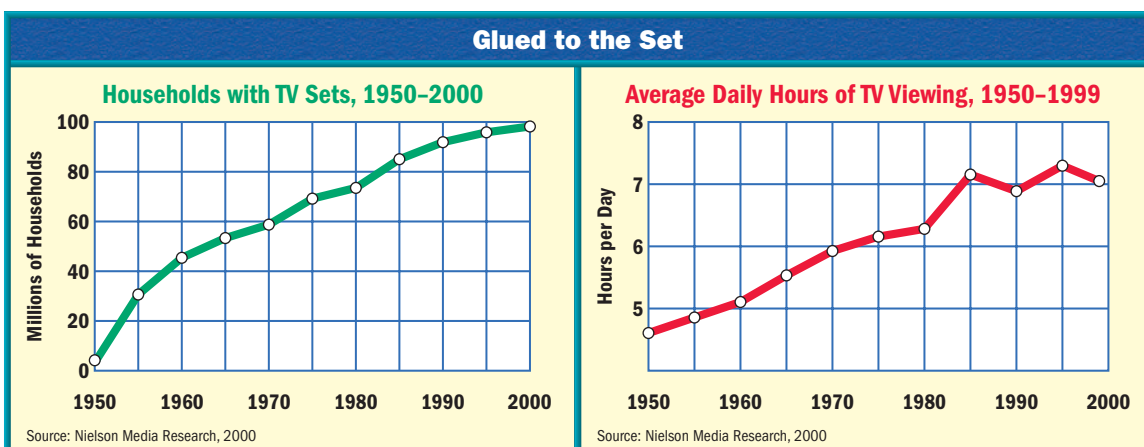
TV QUIZ SHOWS



Beginning with *The \$64,000 Question* in 1955, television created hit quiz shows by adopting a popular format from radio and adding big cash prizes.

The quiz show *Twenty-One* made a star of a shy English professor named Charles Van Doren. He rode a wave of fame and fortune until 1958, when a former contestant revealed that, to heighten the dramatic impact, producers had been giving some of the contestants the right answers.

A scandal followed when a congressional subcommittee confirmed the charges. Most of the quiz shows soon left the air.



SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Graphs

1. During which decade did the number of households with TV sets increase the most?
2. What might account for the drop in TV viewing from 1995–1999?



▲ Lucille Ball had to fight to have real-life husband, Cuban-born Desi Arnaz, cast in the popular TV series *I Love Lucy*.

James Dean, seen here in the movie *Giant*, had a self-confident indifference that made him the idol of teenagers. He died in a car accident at age 24.

STEREOTYPES AND GUNSLINGERS Not everyone was thrilled with television, though. Critics objected to its effects on children and its stereotypical portrayal of women and minorities. Women did, in fact, appear in stereotypical roles, such as the ideal mothers of *Father Knows Best* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. Male characters outnumbered women characters three to one. African Americans and Latinos rarely appeared in television programs at all.

Television in the 1950s portrayed an idealized white America. For the most part, it omitted references to poverty, diversity, and contemporary conflicts, such as the struggle of the civil rights movement against racial discrimination. Instead, it glorified the historical conflicts of the Western frontier in hit shows such as *Gunslinger* and *Have Gun Will Travel*. The level of violence in these popular shows led to ongoing concerns about the effect of television on children. In 1961, Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton Minow voiced this concern to the leaders of the television industry.

A PERSONAL VOICE NEWTON MINOW

“When television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air . . . and keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland.” **B**

—speech to the National Association of Broadcasters, Washington, D.C., May 9, 1961

RADIO AND MOVIES Although TV turned out to be wildly popular, radio and movies survived. But instead of competing with television’s mass market for drama and variety shows, radio stations turned to local programming of news, weather, music, and community issues. The strategy paid off. During the decade, radio advertising rose by 35 percent, and the number of radio stations increased by 50 percent.

From the beginning, television cut into the profitable movie market. In 1948, 18,500 movie theaters had drawn nearly 90 million paid admissions per week. As more people stayed home to watch TV, the number of moviegoers decreased by nearly half. As early as 1951, producer David Selznick worried about Hollywood:

“It’ll never come back. It’ll just keep on crumbling until finally the wind blows the last studio prop across the sands.”

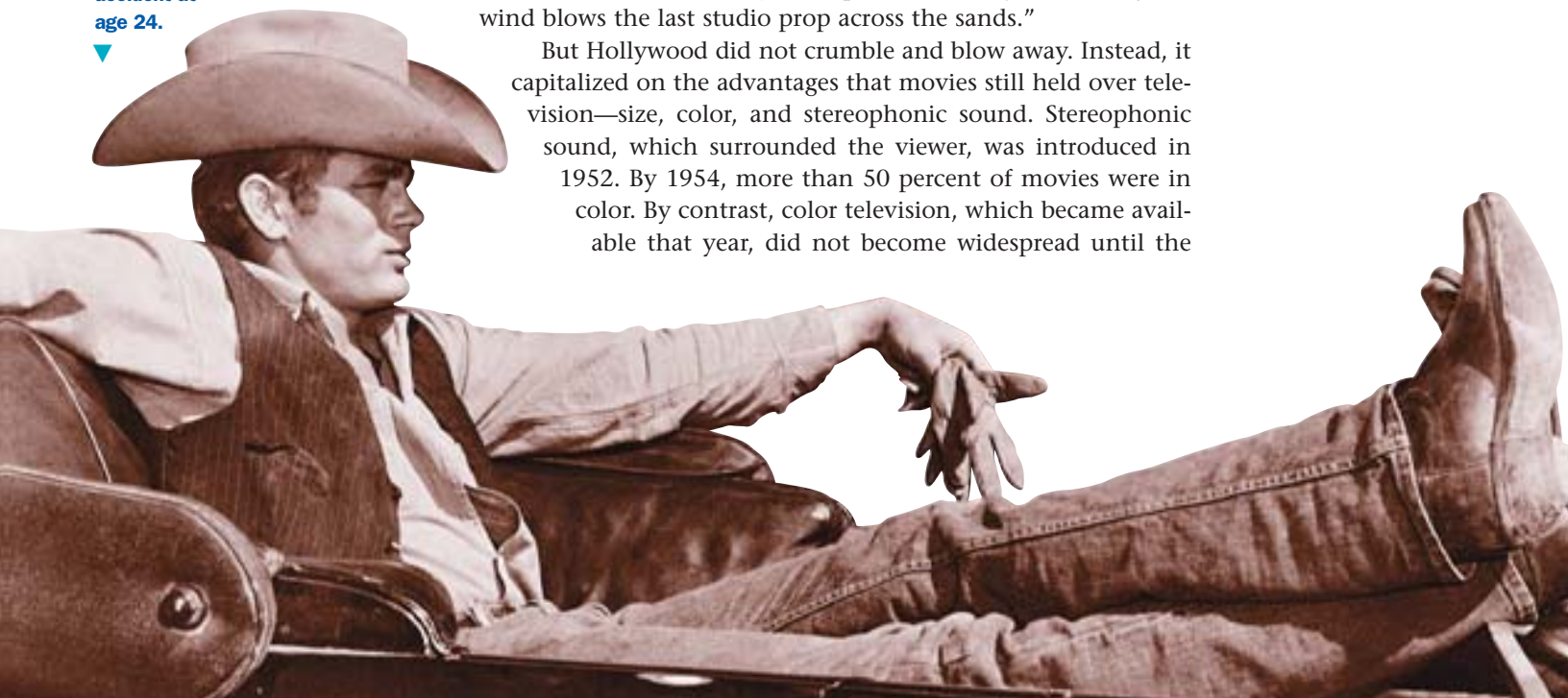
But Hollywood did not crumble and blow away. Instead, it capitalized on the advantages that movies still held over television—size, color, and stereophonic sound. Stereophonic sound, which surrounded the viewer, was introduced in 1952. By 1954, more than 50 percent of movies were in color. By contrast, color television, which became available that year, did not become widespread until the

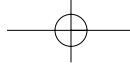
Vocabulary
stereotypical: conventional, formulaic, and oversimplified

MAIN IDEA

Evaluating

B Do you think the rise of television had a positive or a negative effect on Americans? Explain.




MAIN IDEA
Summarizing

C How did radio and movies maintain their appeal in the 1950s?

next decade. In 1953, 20th Century Fox introduced CinemaScope, which projected a wide-angle image on a broad screen. The industry also tried novelty features: Smell-O-Vision and Aroma-Rama piped smells into the theaters to coincide with events shown on the screen. Three-dimensional images, viewed through special glasses supplied by the theaters, appeared to leap into the audience. **C**

A Subculture Emerges

Although the mass media found a wide audience for their portrayals of mostly white popular culture, dissenting voices rang out throughout the 1950s. The messages of the beat movement in literature, and of rock 'n' roll in music, clashed with the tidy suburban view of life and set the stage for the counterculture that would burst forth in the late 1960s.

THE BEAT MOVEMENT Centered in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City's Greenwich Village, the **beat movement** expressed the social and literary nonconformity of artists, poets, and writers. The word *beat* originally meant "weary" but came to refer as well to a musical beat.

Followers of this movement, called beats or beatniks, lived nonconformist lives. They tended to shun regular work and sought a higher consciousness through Zen Buddhism, music, and, sometimes, drugs.

Many beat poets and writers believed in imposing as little structure as possible on their artistic works, which often had a free, open form. They read their poetry aloud in coffeehouses and other gathering places. Works that capture the essence of this era include Allen Ginsberg's long, free-verse poem, *Howl*, published in 1956, and Jack Kerouac's novel of the movement, *On the Road*, published in 1957. This novel describes a nomadic search across America for authentic experiences, people, and values.

A PERSONAL VOICE JACK KEROUAC

"[T]he only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved . . . the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars."

—*On the Road*

Many mainstream Americans found this lifestyle less enchanting. *Look* magazine proclaimed, "There's nothing really new about the beat philosophy. It consists merely of the average American's value scale—turned inside out. The goals of the Beat are *not* watching TV, *not* wearing gray flannel, *not* owning a home in the suburbs, and especially—*not* working." Nonetheless, the beatnik attitudes, way of life, and literature attracted the attention of the media and fired the imaginations of many college students. **D**

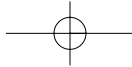
▲ Novelist Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, published in 1957, sold over 500,000 copies.

MAIN IDEA
Analyzing Causes

D Why do you think many young Americans were attracted to the beat movement?

African Americans and Rock 'n' Roll

While beats expressed themselves in unstructured literature, musicians in the 1950s added electronic instruments to traditional blues music, creating rhythm and blues. In 1951, a Cleveland, Ohio, radio disc jockey named Alan Freed was among the first to play the music. This audience was mostly white but the music usually was produced by African-American musicians. Freed's listeners responded enthusiastically, and Freed began promoting the new music that grew out of rhythm and blues and country and pop. He called the music **rock 'n' roll**, a name that has come to mean music that's both black and white—music that is American.



▲ **Chuck Berry is as much known for his “duck walk” as for his electric guitar-playing heard on hit records including “Johnny B. Goode” and “Maybellene.”**

ROCK ‘N’ ROLL In the early and mid-1950s, Richard Penniman, Chuck Berry, Bill Haley and His Comets, and especially Elvis Presley brought rock ‘n’ roll to a frantic pitch of popularity among the newly affluent teens who bought their records. The music’s heavy rhythm, simple melodies, and lyrics—featuring love, cars, and the problems of being young—captivated teenagers across the country.

Elvis Presley, the unofficial “King of Rock ‘n’ Roll,” first developed his musical style by singing in church and listening to gospel, country, and blues music on the radio in Memphis, Tennessee. When he was a young boy, his mother gave him a guitar, and years later he paid four dollars of his own money to record two songs in 1953. Sam Phillips, a rhythm-and-blues producer, discovered Presley and produced his first records. In 1955, Phillips sold Presley’s contract to RCA for \$35,000.

Presley’s live appearances were immensely popular, and 45 of his records sold over a million copies, including “Heartbreak Hotel,” “Hound Dog,” “All Shook Up,” “Don’t Be Cruel,” and “Burning Love.” Although *Look* magazine dismissed him as “a wild troubadour who wails rock ‘n’ roll tunes, flails erratically at a guitar, and wriggles like a peep-show dancer,” Presley’s rebellious style captivated young audiences. Girls screamed and fainted when he performed, and boys tried to imitate him. **E**

Not surprisingly, many adults condemned rock ‘n’ roll. They believed that the new music would lead to teenage delinquency and immorality. In a few cities, rock ‘n’ roll concerts were banned. But despite this controversy, television and radio exposure helped bring rock ‘n’ roll into the mainstream, and it became more acceptable by the end of the decade. Record sales, which were 189 million in 1950, grew with the popularity of rock ‘n’ roll, reaching 600 million in 1960.

MAIN IDEA

Making Inferences

E Based on Elvis Presley’s song titles, what do you think were teenagers’ concerns in the 1950s?

History Through Music

“HOUND DOG”— A ROCK ‘N’ ROLL CROSSOVER

Few examples highlight the influence African Americans had on rock ‘n’ roll—and the lack of credit and compensation they received for their efforts—more than the story of Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton.

In 1953, she recorded and released the song “Hound Dog” to little fanfare. She received a mere \$500 in royalties. Only three years later, Elvis Presley recorded a version of the tune, which sold millions of records. Despite her contributions, Thornton reaped few rewards and struggled her entire career to make ends meet.

SKILLBUILDER Developing Historical Perspective

1. Why might black musicians have been commercially less successful than white musicians in the 1950s? Explain.
2. What concerns of the current generation are reflected in today’s popular music?

SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R11.



▲ **Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton is remembered as the first artist to record “Hound Dog.”**



▶ **Elvis Presley recorded “Hound Dog” in 1956—making it a popular hit.**



THE RACIAL GAP African-American music had inspired the birth of rock ‘n’ roll, and many of the genre’s greatest performers were—like Berry and Penniman—African Americans. In other musical genres, singers Nat “King” Cole and Lena Horne, singer and actor Harry Belafonte, and many others paved the way for minority representation in the entertainment fields. Musicians like Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonius Monk played a style of music characterized by the use of improvisation, called **jazz**. These artists entertained audiences of all races.

But throughout the 1950s, African-American shows were mostly broadcast on separate stations. By 1954, there were 250 radio stations nationwide aimed specifically at African-American listeners. African-American stations were part of radio’s attempt to counter the mass popularity of television by targeting specific audiences. These stations also served advertisers who wanted to reach a large African-American audience. But it was the black listeners—who had fewer television sets than whites and did not find themselves reflected in mainstream programming—who appreciated the stations most. Thulani Davis, a poet, journalist, and playwright, expressed the feelings of one listener about African-American radio (or “race radio” as the character called it) in her novel *1959*.



▲ **Innovative American jazz trumpeter and composer Miles Davis, shown during a recording session in 1959, continued to blaze musical trails throughout his career.**

★ **A PERSONAL VOICE** THULANI DAVIS

“Billie Holiday died and I turned twelve on the same hot July day. The saddest singing in the world was coming out of the radio, race radio that is, the radio of the race. The white stations were on the usual relentless rounds of Pat Boone, Teresa Brewer, and anybody else who couldn’t sing but liked to cover songs that were once colored. . . . White radio was at least honest—they knew anybody in the South could tell Negro voices from white ones, and so they didn’t play our stuff.”

—1959

At the end of the 1950s, African Americans were still largely segregated from the dominant culture. This ongoing segregation—and the racial tensions it fed—would become a powerful force for change in the turbulent 1960s.



ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- mass media
- beat movement
- rock ‘n’ roll
- jazz
- Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

MAIN IDEA

2. SUMMARIZING

Create a “Who’s Who” chart of popular culture idols of the 1950s. Identify the art form and major achievements associated with each person.

Person	Art Form	Achievements

Why do you think they appealed to the young people of the 1950s?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. EVALUATING

Do you agree with Newton Minow’s statement, on page 860, that TV was “a vast wasteland”? Support your answer with details from the text.

4. ANALYZING EFFECTS

How did radio, TV, and the movies contribute to the success of rock ‘n’ roll?

5. COMPARING AND CONTRASTING

In what ways were the rock ‘n’ roll musicians and the beat poets of the 1950s similar and different? Support your answer with details from the text. **Think About:**

- the values the musicians and poets believed in
- people’s reactions to the musicians, poets, and writers