

R&B versus Rock and Roll

Historically: who gets the “Rock and Roll” badge?

- **black artists** = does “rock and roll” label depend on moral relationship to audience?
 - ▶ “crooners” (Fats Domino), gospel singers (Rosetta Thorpe), swing artists (Count Basie, Louis Jordan, Big Joe Turner) with a positive, non-threatening vibe **NO**
 - ▶ women who use sexually implicit lyrics and vocal techniques (Etta James, Mama Thorton, Ruth Brown) **NO**
 - ▶ men who use sexually implicit lyrics (Chuck Berry) or sexually implicit vocal techniques (Little Richard) **YES**
- **white (male) artists** = “rock and roll” label is flexible; applied *whenever*
 - ▶ influenced by the blues or boogie-woogie, or
 - ▶ performed with black (esp. gospel or blues) mannerisms

Etta James (1938-)



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 - 1950-1955: co-writes and performs in bluesy doo-wop groups: incl. swing rhythms / strong back beat / small ensembles / goofy lyrics
 - 1954: "Dance With Me Henry"
 - *an early emblem of Rock and Roll's lasting innuendo*

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 - 1960: Signs with Chess records to pursue pop-oriented soul music
- Her style persists in the music of Janis Joplin and Aretha Franklin; contemporary R&B.
- Meanwhile, she's moved on: top 10 hit (UK) in '96, **won grammies in '94, '03, '04.**

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- Fired for trying to record tin-pan alley tunes at the piano
- Signed with Keen records 1957: "You Send Me" is instant #1 hit for *6 weeks*.
- Recorded 29 top-40 hits in seven years.

melisma: (1) a passage of notes sung to a single syllable (2) a way of singing that extends important syllables with a string of expressive and impromptu-sounding notes.

Common in gospel-influenced R&B, Motown, and Soul.

Ray Charles (1930-2004)



- Like Hank Williams / Johnny Cash, born to poor sharecropper parents, but was admitted to prestigious school for the blind.
- Learned with jazz, blues, and country/western bands
- 1950-1958: Minor hit singles in the shadow of Nat King Cole
- 1959: Crude live recording of 12-bar blues "What'd I Say" is an overnight radio sensation.
- Mixture of blues, jazz, and gospel, w/ strong back beat = core of R&B for decades

Gender in Popular Music Lyrics: Concepts to Consider

- **In 19th c. folk songs and parlor songs, the gender of the singer is often irrelevant to the meaning of the song**
 - ▶ Sun and Moon, In the Pines, By the Banks: dialogues between man and woman, sung by one gender
- **Recall 1920s examples: women singers assuming masculine voice -- demonstrates the mutability of feminine identity**
 - ▶ Prove It On Me, You Gonna Wake Some Mornin', Where'd You Get Those Eyes
- **1930s-40s Tin Pan Alley & Swing**
 - ▶ Mostly neutralize specific gender (or race, or class) perspectives to favor *supposedly* “universal” perspectives on love
 - ▶ Creates opportunity for, but does not presuppose, women as individuals with distinctive desires.

Gender in Popular Music Lyrics: Concepts to Consider

- **Bradby's "She Told Me What To Say"**

- ▶ *Problem: Language* of popular music often gender-ambiguous. Male singers more often sing high than low
- ▶ **Male strategies to avoid feminization in blues, country, pop:**
 - 1. take active *subject* position (i.e. "I love you," "I saw her," "I'll tell the world you're **mine**")
 - 2. represent sexual love *to* other men, perform empowerment
- ▶ **In rock & roll era, feminine desire often requires passive grammar.**
 - Girl-groups of late 50s/early60s often say "*You love me*" (passive)
 - Mid-60s often say = "*I love him*" = active fantasy / indirect expression in reality.
- ▶ How do Beatles' choices, in covering girl-group songs, clarify this cultural distinction? (Bottom of p 367)
- ▶ How does a gender shift affect Beatles' performance of "Mr. Postman"?