

*Ready for a*

# BRAND NEW BEAT

How "DANCING IN THE STREET"

Became the Anthem for a Changing America

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## CHAPTER ONE

# ARE YOU READY?

**F**or my generation rock was not a controversy, it was a fact. My earliest memory of rock 'n' roll is Elvis Presley. For others it may be Bill Haley or Chuck Berry. For people born soon after World War II, rock 'n' roll was a part of childhood. The rockers, especially Elvis, are remembered as controversies. But there was no controversy among the kids. They loved the songs, their sense of mischief and especially the driving beat. The controversy came from adults. Only adults attacked Elvis or rock 'n' roll. The controversy was only in their minds—on their lips. It was the beginning of what came to be known as “the generation gap,” a phrase coined by Columbia University president Grayson Kirk in April 1968, shortly before students seized control of his campus.

There has never been an American generation that so identified with its music, regarded it as its own, the way the Americans who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s did. The music that started as a subversive movement took over the culture and became a huge, commercially dominant industry. The greatest of the many seismic shifts in the music industry is that young people became the target audience. In no previous generation had the main thrust of popular music been an attempt to appeal to people in their teens.

Since this music was an expression of the changing times, it is not surprising that it was profoundly about racial integration. When it started, blacks and whites lived in two completely different worlds within America. It was not only that they lived in separate places and sent their children to different schools. They had separate cultures, listened to completely different music on separate radio stations, had different jokes, different professional baseball leagues, different boy scout troops, and a totally different perspective of America and the world.

White people knew very little about, and most gave little thought to, the people they politely referred to as "Negroes." *Negro*, a Spanish word, descended, like the people it labeled, from the slave trade. Whites were called "white" because it was good to be white, but to call black people "black," to remind them of their blackness, was to insult them. In slave times the words *nigger* and *black* were used almost interchangeably, often as a label. If Joe was black, he would be called "Black Joe" or "Nigger Joe," so as not to be confused with a white man named Joe.

The language reversed itself in the great social shift of the late 1960s. The first well-known figure to promote the term *black* was black nationalist Malcolm X, who almost always used it, and when he used *Negroes*, he would say "so-called Negroes." His point was that blackness should be a source of pride. He also attempted to turn the tables by making *white* a pejorative as in the frequent "white devils." Martin Luther King, on the other hand, rarely used the term *black* and almost always said "Negro." So the shift in language represented not only a shift in white thinking but an important cultural and political schism among blacks, even those who were politically active. By the end of the 1960s, both King and Malcolm had been murdered, and the word *black* had completely over-

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taken the word *Negro*, proving that the more militant Malcolm X's point of view had a greater impact than is commonly recognized. *Negro* has become a pejorative for a black who lacked pride. This shift in language showed that there were enormous upheavals and changes in thinking taking place. Music, like languages, also showed these shifts, and only a few songs, such as "Dancing in the Street," were able to stand solidly on both sides of the social fissures.

What became popular music in the 1950s was a fusion of many influences, some of them white and some black, but it all began with a black form known as "the blues."

The blues came out of African music by way of slavery, but no one has been able to date its exact origin. Among the many rhythms and traditions of African music that went into the blues and other African American music was the West African tradition of call-and-response, in which a chorus responds, often repeatedly, to the song line of the leader, and the leader reprises the chorus. In the blues, often performed by a single singer, the singer responds to him- or herself. This call-and-response form was central not only to blues but also to its later offshoot, rhythm & blues, and eventually Motown, from which "Dancing in the Street" would be only one of many examples. Jazz also bears traces of call-and-response. In the West African version, as in jazz, the chorus could improvise, going into long or short riffs as the moment moved them.

Another African characteristic found among blues singers and black vocalists who followed is a style of vocal distortions that has come to be thought of as "the black style of singing." It is why most black vocalists of the 1960s or earlier, including Martha Reeves, even unseen on the radio, would never be mistaken for white. These

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distortions include a variety of raspy shouts, growls, and, in the case of gospel singers such as Reeves, the stretching of one note into several tones.

Amiri Baraka, born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1934 originally named LeRoi Jones, a leading Beat poet, playwright, and commentator on black culture and especially music, wrote in his 1963 book on jazz, *Blues People*:

Melodic diversity in African music came not only in the actual arrangements of notes (in terms of Western transcription) but in the singer's vocal interpretation. The "tense slightly hoarse-hoarse sounding vocal techniques" of the work songs and the blues stem directly from West African musical tradition. (This kind of singing voice is also common to much other non-Western music.) In African languages the meaning of a word can be changed simply by altering the *pitch* of the word, or changing its stress . . . philologists call this "significant tone," the combination of pitch and timbre used to produce changes of meanings in words.

Highly improvisational jazz is said to have begun around the turn of the twentieth century, although it is difficult to define a beginning, since this music is rooted in blues, which is rooted in earlier forms of music. Big blues bands with blaring brass sections developed in the 1920s, particularly in western towns, most notably Kansas City, which was known for its casinos and nightclubs. These led to a style known as the "shouting blues," owing to the singers' efforts to make themselves heard, because the bands were so loud. The influence was not only on singers but on jazz musicians such as Ornette Coleman, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane, whose instruments flew off into a kind of shout. While blues had been essen-

tially a rural music for an essentially rural population, a growing urban black population developed an urban blues sound from these big bands, and this was the origin of a new black music called rhythm & blues. It was music purely for black people, and this, according to Amiri Baraka, spared it from the “sterilization” that might have “resulted from the total immersion.”

Most historians credit a singer and sax player named Louis Jordan as the critical early step in the development of rhythm & blues and by extension one of the early roots of rock ‘n’ roll. He was in fact one of the first to use the word *rock* in his music, and recorded a number of pieces in the 1940s that may be considered among the first experiments in rap. He performed with six- to eight-player bands and took the important step of including the guitar. His music was aimed at newly urbanized blacks so that seemingly rural songs such as “beans and cornbread” turned out to be about actual urban life. He had several recordings in the 1940s that sold more than a million copies, including “Is You Is or Is You Ain’t My Baby?” and “Caldonia.” His appeal was partly musical innovation and partly humor, in both his songs and his constant asides.

R&B music was always regarded as an exclusively black form—in the music business, the definition of rhythm & blues was often simply “music for black people”—but Jordan also found popularity with whites. So this phenomenon known in music as crossover—blacks that could appeal to whites—was at the very beginning of rhythm & blues.

After World War II black bands occasionally became popular with white listeners, with the help of such musicians as vibes master Lionel Hampton and saxophonist Erskine Hawkins. Hampton, raised in Alabama and then in Chicago, was a natural for crossover. A percussionist, he took up and became the master of the vibraphone, which was thought of as a white instrument, developed in the 1920s

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for vaudeville orchestras. It was Hampton who brought it to jazz. Trumpeter Erskine Hawkins seemed destined for crossover as well. He was named after Erskine Ramsay, a wealthy Alabama-based Scottish industrialist who gave a bank account to any child named after him. As a musician, composer, and band leader, he became associated with many famous big bands of the World War II era. White bands such as the Glenn Miller Orchestra played his music. Nat King Cole, a gifted jazz pianist, abandoned his superb trio to croon songs such as Irving Gordon's "Unforgettable" in 1951 and Victor Young and Edward Heyman's "When I Fall in Love" in 1957. Although Cole sang white songs in a white style for white audiences, he still held on to black fans.

A few of the R&B bands, especially Jordan's, were able to record for big national record companies such as Capitol, Decca, and Victor. One of the reasons for this crossover phenomena was swing, big-band dance music with an up tempo and strong rhythm that became extremely popular during World War II. Many historians believe it began as black music in Harlem in the 1920s but never took off in the black community because the huge nightclubs and big payrolls required for the enormous size of the bands made it too expensive. It became associated with white musicians such as Benny Goodman. Benny Goodman even had a handful of black musicians. That was how Lionel Hampton became crossover. But swing's audience was white. Amiri Baraka wrote, "Swing music was the result of arranged big-band jazz, as it developed to a music that had almost nothing to do with blues, had very little to do with black America, though that is certainly where it came from." When Jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong was asked about swing he said, "Ah, swing, well, we used to call it syncopation—then they called it ragtime, then blues—then jazz. Now it's swing. White folks, yo'all sho is a mess."

Whites and blacks had taken black music in two different direc-

tions. Blacks had R&B and whites had swing. But after the war swing was found too expensive even for white people, and though it fostered individual artists who were enormous stars, such as Frank Sinatra, and a legacy of enduring songs, swing itself began to falter and white audiences were looking for something new. Ironically, once they got something new, the new singers frequently sang swing songs. Rock 'n' rollers Fats Domino, Elvis Presley, and Jerry Lee Lewis all sang a few swing songs, such as Presley's 1960 "Are You Lonesome Tonight?," which was written in 1927 by vaudeville greats Lou Handman and Roy Turk.

In the early 1950s the white music industry seemed to be struggling to find a name for the new black music. All black music was called "race music." The pejorative attitude was unmistakable. *Race* at the time was a word like *black*, implying a second-rate status. Though there was a Caucasian race, race music would not mean white music because *race* almost never meant "white." Only blacks were *race*. "Race music" was immediately understood. Bruce Morrow, the popular white 1960s rhythm & blues disc jockey known to most of New York City as Cousin Brucie, said in a recent interview, "It is still upsetting to me that in my life I lived through something being called race music."

While the name persisted for more than a decade more, in the late 1940s Decca started talking about "sepia music" while MGM used the term "ebony." *Billboard*, the magazine whose weekly sales charts define hits, in 1949 stopped calling its chart of black music "race" and it became the "rhythm & blues chart." It was not difficult for *Billboard* to distinguish between sales to black people and sales to white people, since each had their own radio stations and their own record stores.

R&B, like all black music, came from the blues. It had influences of gospel, which came from traditional spirituals and in the 1930s



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became the music of the black church. But it was also influenced by big bands and, most important, had a driving rhythm. It was distinctly urban, with the electric throb of the city characterized by the use of electric rather than acoustic guitars and the thump of a new instrument, the electric bass.

Jerry Wexler, the future record producer who is often credited with inventing the term "rhythm & blues," when writing for *Billboard*, said that he later regretted not calling it "rhythm & gospel." In fact, much of it was gospel singers such as Martha Reeves singing to a beat hardened by the throb of electric guitars and electric bass. Wexler, the son of a Czech-Galician talmudic scholar turned New York window washer, would become one of the leading producers of R&B at Atlantic Records.

Amiri Baraka was interviewed in his home in a modest middle-class neighborhood of Newark. Given his résumé, it was reasonable to wonder who would come to the door. Would it be LeRoi Jones, the beatnik poet who displayed his verse in Greenwich Village with illustrations of erect penises, the innovative writer whose plays and poetry have earned him a place in the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the brilliant critic of black popular music, the wild radical renaming himself Amiri Baraka who was arrested with a gun in the 1967 Newark riots, the poet laureate of New Jersey whom the state tried to remove because of a verse in his poem that implicated Israel in the World Trade Center bombing? Governor James E. McGreevey demanded his resignation, and when Baraka refused to resign, McGreevey discovered that he did not have the right to fire him, whereupon the state legislature eliminated the post, which was how most people discovered that New Jersey had a poet laureate. Who would this man be, who has alternately been accused of sexism, homophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism, that angry voice who at times appeared to advocate violence and even rape?

The answer was none of the above. The small, slightly built man in a cardigan sweater with glasses and a white beard looked like a professor, a scholar, and teacher. And he was those things, too. A warm and gracious man, he ushered me past a room of African art, framed drawings, and mementos of a life in African American art into the kitchen, where we could sit at a table, sip orange juice, and talk music, a subject for which he has endless knowledge and enthusiasm. He defined R&B as “a blues deviation with a more modern rhythmic base—an emphatic rhythm.” He dates it to Jordan and other bands of the 1930s and 1940s who mixed it with jazz. “The old big bands could do everything—switch back and forth. That was the delight of them. It was the more commercial division such as on radio stations that need to put things into categories.” He said that bands such as Cab Calloway, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington occasionally did R&B. He remembered when he was growing up in Newark huge clubs where big bands performed to spacious but crowded dance floors. “They played jazz with a stronger rhythm for dancing,” he remembered. “That’s what made it popular.” He particularly recalled Lucky Millinder. Born in Alabama, Lucius Millinder earned his reputation in Chicago as a dancer and a master of ceremonies. Although he could not read music or play an instrument and rarely even sang, he became a popular African American bandleader and was featured in the Savoy Ballroom in Manhattan. His biggest World War II hit was “When the Lights Go On Again (All Over the World),” which, like much of his music at the time, was swing. After the war, he toured a great deal, and Baraka as a young man heard him playing R&B in Newark dance halls. His band’s style went increasingly toward R&B and was one of the forerunners of 1950s rock ‘n’ roll, which is why he was among Baraka’s earliest R&B memories.

Most African American music, including church music, true to

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its African roots, was about dance or at least movement. Body movement was often considered essential, even to singing gospel. The great gospel singer Mahalia Jackson used to say her hands and feet were essential and “my whole body to say all that is in me.”

Most of the new music of the 1940s and early 1950s was recorded by small independent record labels specializing in R&B destined for black audiences and popularized through black radio stations. These independent black record companies sprang up throughout the country from the early 1940s to the early 1950s in many of the black urban centers such as New York, Newark, Chicago, and especially Los Angeles, where many blacks had migrated during and after World War II. At the same time, black radio stations with black disc jockeys playing R&B for black listeners proliferated wherever there were concentrations of black population. It is significant for the purposes of this story to note that by the 1940s Detroit was the rare important black urban center where there was no independent black label.

But few of the recording studios or radio stations were black owned. Black radio was largely white staffed, including not only producers and directors but also some of the leading deejays who adapted a black radio style.