YEAH YEAH YEAH
The Story of Modern Pop
BOB STANLEY
For Tessa

CONTENTS

Title Page
Dedication
Introduction
Prologue

PART ONE
1 Feet Up: The First British Hit Parade
2 Flip, Flop and Fly: Bill Haley and Jump Blues
3 A Mess of Blues: Elvis Presley
4 Put Your Cat Clothes On: Sun Records and Rockabilly
5 Teenage Wildlife: Rock ‘n’ Roll
6 Fifteen Miles from Middlesbrough: Skiffle
7 Rock with the Cavemen: British Rock ‘n’ Roll
8 Whispering Bells: Doo Wop
9 1960: It Will Stand
10 Walk with Me in Paradise Garden: Phil Spector and Joe Meek
11 The Trouble with Boys: The Brill Building and Girl Groups

PART TWO
12 Act Naturally: The Beatles
13 Needles and Pins: The Beat Boom
14 Who’s Driving Your Plane? The Rolling Stones
15 This Is My Prayer: The Birth of Soul
16 The Rake’s Progress: Bob Dylan
17 America Strikes Back: The Byrds and Folk Rock
18 Up the Ladder to the Roof: Tamla Motown
19 1966: The London Look
20 Endless Summer: The Beach Boys
21 The Golden Road: San Francisco and Psychedelia
22 Pop Gets Sophisticated: Soft Rock
23 Crying in the Streets: Deep Soul
24 I Can’t Sing, I Ain’t Pretty and My Legs Are Thin: Hard Rock
25 Bubblegum Is the Naked Truth: The Monkees

PART THREE
26 1970: Everything’s Gone Grey
27 An English Pastoral: British Folk Rock
28 Freddie’s Dead: Electrified Soul
29 State of Independence: Jamaica
30 It Came from the Suburbs: Marc Bolan and David Bowie
31 Deluxe and Delightful: Glam
32 The Sound of Philadelphia: Soft Soul
33 Progressive Rock (and Simpler Pleasures)
34 Young Love: Weenyboppers and Boy Bands
35 See That Girl: Abba
36 Beyond the Blue Horizon: Country and Western
37 Before and After the Gold Rush: Laurel Canyon
38 1975: Storm Warning

PART FOUR
39 Courage, Audacity and Revolt: The Sex Pistols
40 Cranked Up Really High: Punk Rock
41 Pleasantly Antagonistic: New Wave
42 Supernature: Disco
43 Islands in the Stream: The Bee Gees
44 Routine Is the Enemy of Music: Post-punk
45 Back to the Future: Two Tone and Mod
46 A Shark in Jet’s Clothing: America after Punk
47 This Is Tomorrow: Kraftwerk and Electropop
48 Adventures on the Wheels of Steel: Early Rap
49 Here Comes That Feeling: New Pop
50 American Rock (Ooh Yeah)
51 Just a King in Mirrors: Michael Jackson
52 Highs in the Mid-Eighties: Prince and Madonna
53 Some Kind of Monster: Metal
54 Poised over the Pause Button: The Smiths and the Birth of Indie
55 1985: What the Fuck Is Going On?
56 We Were Never Being Boring: Pet Shop Boys and New Order

PART FIVE
57 Chicago and Detroit: House and Techno
58 Smiley Culture: Acid House and Manchester
59 1991: Time for the Mu Mu
60 All Eyez on Me: Hip Hop
61 Bassline Changed My Life: Dance Music
62 This Is How You Disappear: Bristol, Shoegazing and a New Psychedelia
63 As a Defence, I’m Neutered and Spayed: Grunge
64 Ever Decreasing Circles: Blur, Suede and Britpop
INTRODUCTION

I remember reading about a kid, twelve or thirteen years old, who used to spend Saturday mornings lurking in the Vintage Record Centre on Roman Way in North London. He would watch the old Teds and the young rockabillies, the dandified fifties revivalists and the single middle-aged men walk through the door, thumb through the racks, and all ask for the same record: ‘Do you have “Cast Iron Arm” by Peanuts Wilson?’ The answer was always no. The kid was in awe of this record. It must, he figured, be the best record ever made. What could it sound like? Who was Peanuts Wilson? Why was the arm made of cast iron? This would have been in the mid-seventies and there was no way he could find out the answers to these questions, or even get to hear the record because it was so rare, and so in demand. He dreamed about it, tried to imagine how it might sound: harder than ‘Hound Dog’, sharper than ‘Summertime Blues’. For this kid, in its magical elusiveness, ‘Cast Iron Arm’ embodied the wonder of pop music.

In the twenty-first century anyone can type the name Peanuts Wilson into YouTube or Spotify or iTunes and hear ‘Cast Iron Arm’, with its honking sax, comic interludes and thunking backbeat. The same goes for the rarest British hard-rock album, Growers of Mushroom by Leaf Hound. Or ‘Carry Me Home’, a still unreleased Beach Boys outtake from their Holland album. This wasn’t possible in the pre-digital age, when information was passed around pop fans via music papers and radio shows, fanzines, cassettes and word of mouth – analogue technology, airwaves, printing presses, everything in perpetual motion. Before the arrival of Napster in 2000, the gateway for iTunes, it had been this way for the best part of five decades: this was the modern pop era.
There have been many great music books written since 2000, on genres, microgenres, single albums, even single songs. But there hasn’t, as far as I’m aware, been a book on the whole of modern pop’s development, none to explain when and why things happened, the connections, the splinters, what has been lost or forgotten along the way.

My intention with Yeah Yeah Yeah is to give the reader a feel for pop’s development as it happened, by drawing a straight line – with the odd wiggle and personal diversion – from the birth of the seven-inch single to the decline of pop music as a palpable, physical thing in the nineties. Chronologically, I will explore how each new era brought with it new icons and iconoclasts, the arrival and excitement of hot sounds, and how, when they began to cool off, several different styles developed and myriad subgenres were created.

From the fifties to the nineties, pop was personal and private. You could live in its wider world but also shape it to your own ends by amassing a collection of vinyl, making tapes of singles in the order you wanted to hear them, then passing on the secret to fellow travellers. I had exercise books in which I’d write down the new Top 20 every Tuesday: at 12.45 we’d have the radio on at school, and friends huddled together to find out whether the heroic Altered Images had dislodged the dreadful Dave Stewart and Barbara Gaskin from the top of the chart. It was a religion. I didn’t feel the need to go to church.

My first published work was in a fanzine called Pop Avalanche in 1986. I sent a copy to the New Musical Express and they sent me off to review a Johnny Cash show in Peterborough. Since 1990, I’ve been fortunate enough to see the pop world from both sides, as a fan, a writer, and also as a member of a pop group: I was twenty-five when Saint Etienne started, and we had the remarkable good fortune to appear on Top of the Pops, on the cover of the NME and on stage around the world. For the last dozen years I have written for The Times and the Guardian, which has given me the opportunity to interview stars and – equally important to me – to shine some light on records, singers, writers and producers who I thought were undeservedly obscure.

This book picks up the threads that connect doo wop, via Philly soul, to house music, or – possibly less obviously – ones that link Johnny Duncan’s ‘Last Train to San Fernando’ to the Buzzcocks’ ‘Boredom’ to the Prodigy’s ‘Everybody in the Place’. I want to give a sense of how the web was woven. Where does Frankie Lymon fit in? More to the point, in a world where Nick Drake is considerably better known than Fairport Convention, how were both perceived at the time, and how did they affect pop’s climate? Chronologically, I explore how the
technology not only interacts with music, but helps to start the era (the portable record player), then kill it (the compact disc as Trojan horse), and how modern pop was built up by communication, the distribution of information, the secret world of music papers and fanzines, late-night or illegal radio broadcasts, and stolen moments on TV shows.

I wanted to write this book because there is no such guide. I wanted to argue that the separation of rock and pop is false, and that disco and large swathes of black and electronic music have been virtually ignored by traditional pop histories. This situation has changed considerably since Saint Etienne formed in 1990, though rockism still exists, and snobbery is still rife. At the other extreme, some purists don’t think of albums as pop at all, but I’m not going to be a seven-inch fascist – albums were an essential part of modern pop’s development.

What exactly is pop? For me, it includes rock, R&B, soul, hip hop, house, techno, metal and country. If you make records, singles and albums, and if you go on TV or on tour to promote them, you’re in the pop business. If you sing a cappella folk songs in a pub in Whitby, you’re not. Pop needs an audience that the artist doesn’t know personally – it has to be transferable. Most basically, anything that gets into the charts is pop, be it Buddy Holly, Black Sabbath or Bucks Fizz. So, Laurie Anderson’s ‘O Superman’ is pop music (UK no. 2 in 1981), as is Waldo de los Ríos’s ‘Mozart No. 40’ (UK no. 5 ’71), and the Marcels’ ‘Blue Moon’ (UK and US no. 1 ’61). The charts are vital social history. It is much harder to recover the menacing impact of ‘Be-Bop-a-Lula’ or future shock of ‘I Feel Love’ without hearing them alongside contemporary hits: the former shared a chart with Mel Tormé’s ‘Mountain Greenery’ and Ted Heath’s ‘The Faithful Hussar’; the latter entered the chart sandwiched between Alessi’s ‘Oh Lori’ and the Muppets’ ‘Halfway down the Stairs’. Context is everything.

What creates great pop? Tension, opposition, progress and fear of progress. I love the tensions between the industry and the underground, between artifice and authenticity, between the adventurers and the curators, between rock and pop, between dumb and clever, between boys and girls. A permanent state of flux informed the modern pop era and taking sides is part of the fun. Some saw punk, for instance, as a way of rewriting the rules completely, as the Futurists had done in art, while others read 1977 as a return to roots, the excitement of first-wave rock ‘n’ roll revisited. Both sides had a strong case. On the one hand you had Malcolm McLaren’s Debord-quoting art-school insurrection; on the other you had the Clash and Joe Strummer’s ‘cut the crap’ ideology. In pop, the conservative can be seen as cool. But pop music isn’t there to be contained. It isn’t school – it only
has unwritten rules, and they’re all there to be broken. The energy and insight of pop comes from juggling its contradictions rather than purging them. Queen may have proudly printed ‘no synthesizers’ on their first few album covers, suggesting they were all rock, no artifice, but when they changed their minds in 1980 for ‘Another One Bites the Dust’ it gave them an international number one, and became an early source for hip-hop samples; pop moved forward and everyone was happy.

So is modern pop just chart music? Well, partly, as the magic of the charts is that they can be perfect time capsules, and can cover all pop genres with no favouring the hip or the entitled, the homebodies or the voyagers. Yet the charts did not always reflect emerging movements. Instead, the new music would percolate, inspire and – eventually – burst into the chart at a later date: the UK’s chart stats don’t bear out the influence of the Velvet Underground (one UK Top 10 hit for Lou Reed), or Marvin Gaye’s What’s Going On (none of the four singles from it even reached the Top 50), or the Smiths (none of their singles went any higher than number ten). It may seem contradictory to write about the hitless Johnny Burnette Trio or the Stooges or Minor Threat or Juan Atkins in this book, but they emerged in the modern pop era and their influence on it, and the music of the future, is undeniable. Outliers get absorbed into the mainstream. Pop is a decades-long love affair. Opposites attract.

When did the modern pop era start? In 1952, as I will soon explain. The end point is more complicated; the start of the digital age is much blurrier, and the tail-off is gradual. I’m using the end of vinyl as pop’s main format as a line in the sand. When Culture Beat’s ‘Mr Vain’ reached number one in the UK in 1993, it was the first chart-topper since Lita Roza’s ‘(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window’ in 1953 not to have been issued on a seven-inch single; soon after ‘Mr Vain’ came the first number one not available on vinyl at all, only CD and cassette – Celine Dion’s ‘Think Twice’ in February ‘95.

This book is not meant to be an encyclopedia; I believe in the myth and legend of pop as much as anyone who grew up on TOTP, the NME and Smash Hits, the histories and half-truths about Gene Vincent, Arthur Lee, David Bowie or Agnetha Fältskog that made it so constantly thrilling. I love the flash and glory of pop’s superstars, whether it’s the Beatles hurtling down the platform at Marylebone station to avoid screaming fans, or a quick glimpse of Kylie’s knickers on stage.

I love the underdog equally – Lou Christie and his almost forgotten falsetto that made Frankie Valli sound like Johnny Cash – and the bit-part players, the backroom staff, the hack writers, and the ham-radio nerds who end up as
engineers: Joe Meek, Giorgio Moroder, Rodney Jerkins, studio-bound characters like Derrick May, Martin Hannett and Holland/Dozier/Holland. And John Carter, the soft-spoken Brummie songwriter who could switch from Eurovision entries (Mary Hopkin’s ‘Knock, Knock Who’s There’, UK no. 2 ’70), to garage bubblegum (the Music Explosion’s ‘Little Bit of Soul’, US no. 2 ’67), and then write the all-time summer anthem in First Class’s ‘Beach Baby’. Some say it’s just ersatz Beach Boys. Not me. I think it is the work of a committed pop fan, wanting to give something back, trying to amplify his love of the Beach Boys.

There are so many connections which can be lost in the fractured, static nature of the digital age; without record labels to give us the names of writers and producers to study, without record shops or fanzines to filter endless information, we are less likely to find the obvious connections that run through modern pop. Listening to Amy Winehouse’s ‘Tears Dry on Their Own’ on iTunes we wouldn’t know that she samples Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell’s ‘Ain’t No Mountain High Enough’. Or that this song was written by Motown staffers Nick Ashford and Valerie Simpson, who went on to write Chaka Khan’s ‘I’m Every Woman’ and their own hit ‘Solid’ (US no. 12, UK no. 3 ’84) but had previously worked for New York’s Scepter/Wand labels, where they wrote for ex-beautyqueen and early soul pioneer Maxine Brown. Or that Scepter/Wand initially made its money from girl group the Shirelles, whose first major hit was ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ (US no. 1, UK no. 3 ’60), and who were also favourites of Amy Winehouse. We have to know where music has come from in order to understand where it’s at and where it could be heading. This book is a framework, and hopefully it will lead you to discover plenty of new favourites and new inspirations.

PROLOGUE

Britain and America were two very different worlds in the early fifties, with two very different pop cultures. 1945 had been the year in which the twentieth century had truly become the American century: the USA was the only country to emerge from the war stronger than it had been in 1939, with the Depression a distant memory, and the Marshall Plan had enabled it to enrich and rebuild future allies (Germany, Japan, Turkey), while cocking a snook at potential rivals (Great Britain). American and British cultures had thrillingly intersected – and clashed – during the war, when ordinary Britons were both dazzled by handsome GIs stationed in London, Newport, Southampton and Suffolk, and also appalled by the fact of segregation. Pre-war there had been little cultural overlap; post-war, the countries separated again, but that brief encounter played on their memories.
Bombed-out Britain, at the turn of the fifties, looked to America for inspiration, and to Hollywood and Broadway for entertainment. It would have found a fair amount of dirt on the edges of American popular culture after the war: big-circulation magazines packaged prostitution, rape and violence as entertainment in short stories on the Wild West, which Hollywood then mined for its cowboy movies; film noir, a yet-to-be-christened genre, was equally charged, crime-ridden and rich in sin. After all, one and all had just been at war and seen some very terrible things.\(^1\)

But mainstream American popular music was quite dissimilar. Post-war and pre-rock ’n’ roll, it conformed to a Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade aesthetic, which British writers and performers aspired to mimic. Prior to the war the pop charts in *Billboard*, America’s trade magazine for the music industry, had been very urban and very white, and – on the surface – nothing much had changed by the early fifties.

Britain, on the other hand, was a musical backwater – variety shows, summer seasons in seaside resorts, state-run radio, virtually no TV – and it had none of the pop pretensions which would see it rise in the sixties. It sucked up everything America provided, with little knowledge of the upheavals that were affecting ‘the home of modern popular music’.

To try and understand the beginnings of the modern pop era better, we have to dig back a little and explore the major changes that had occurred in American popular music in the forties. During the war there had been two strikes in America – both for an increase in royalties – which had significant long-term consequences. The first, by the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) in 1941, blocked any of the organisation’s songs from being played on the radio, a gift to rival set-up BMI (Broadcast Music Incorporated). ASCAP was home to established songwriters like Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Johnny Mercer and Sammy Cahn, ones who could both read and write music. BMI looked to the future, away from sheet music, and its copyrights were largely of jazz, blues and country music, which ASCAP had effectively boycotted. Jazz pianist Bobby Troup wrote ‘Daddy’,\(^2\) a number one in 1941 for big-band leader Sammy Kaye which Kaye would likely never have recorded if ASCAP hadn’t been on strike. It was also possible to record ancient, out-of-copyright music: in January ’41 *Time* magazine reported how ‘the airwaves gave off strange sounds last week. Ray Noble’s magnificent band was reduced to rendering a super-syncopated version of “Camptown Races”, followed by “Liebestraum” in rumba time.’ Another surreal result of the ban was a string of foreign songs – also beyond
ASCAP copyright – reaching the chart: Jimmy Dorsey’s ‘Amapola’, Artie Shaw’s ‘Frenesi’ and Glenn Miller’s ‘Song of the Volga Boatmen’ were all US number ones in 1941. These were new flavours and ingredients for American pop music which would continue to inform it long after the strike ended: major hits of 1950, for instance, included Anton Karas’s ‘Harry Lime Theme’ from the Vienna-set movie The Third Man, Vaughn Monroe’s hushed, eerie and exotic ‘Bamboo’, and the Weavers’ version of Leadbelly’s folk-blues song ‘Goodnight Irene’.

As if the ASCAP ban hadn’t shaken up the American music industry enough, a 1942 strike by the US musicians’ union led to a ban on all recording. Live performances were still allowed, but no new records could be made. Record companies quickly realised that the strike didn’t apply to singers, just musicians, so they put together vocal groups who sang a cappella backing behind stars such as the Tommy Dorsey band’s Frank Sinatra. Singers remained in the public eye, while musicians were reduced to making a living from public performances. In the swing era – the big-band years from 1935 to 1945 – the singers had usually taken second billing to the band leaders; when the musicians’ union finally negotiated settlements with the record companies, they found that the popularity of the bands had been largely eclipsed by their vocalists.3

The decline of the big band had an even more dramatic effect on American radio, where ‘disc jockeys’ – a term first used as an insult by Variety magazine in 1941 – began to replace live on-air music. This was down to simple economics (a live band cost a lot more to employ than one man with a stack of records) and also the rise of small local stations after the war. The biggest influence in this shift from live music to records was a man called Martin Block. At WNEW in New York, Block had started a programme in 1935 called Make Believe Ballroom, entirely made up of his record collection. On air, he would read out facts about each record from Billboard and Variety – before Block, radio announcers had only read out the titles in stern newsreader voices.4 He also ad-libbed commercials to four million listeners, which began to earn WNEW a lot of revenue. Block’s airplay alone could create a hit record.5 He syndicated his show nationwide in 1948, the year in which the transistor was invented, making the portable transistor radio possible and taking music out of the house and onto the street.

By the late forties the popularity of Block’s show had sparked a whole industry – radio advertising – exemplified by the jingle. America was almost unique in seeing radio, from its inception in the twenties, as a purely commercial enterprise rather than as a government tool. As catchy jingles became more prevalent, the records played between them began to sound similarly perky – Teresa Brewer’s
‘Music Music Music’, the first US number one of the fifties, could have worked just as well if it had been used as a Lucky Strike jingle. In other words, the jingles drove radio; records were largely there to fill the space in between.6

Most countries in Europe saw radio as a means of broadcasting educational material or propaganda, and the BBC’s three channels – the Home Service (which started in 1939), the Light Programme (1945) and the Third Programme (1946) – had a monopoly in Britain; pop music barely existed. Among the few music shows on the Light Programme in 1952 was Those Were the Days: Harry Davidson’s Orchestra played old-time dance music, and the live studio audience were invited to do the Boston two-step, the palais glide and the empress tango; the show had all the excitement of a warm cup of squash next to Martin Block’s Coke float and root beer. The more free-spirited Jack Jackson presented Record Roundup, which ran from 1948 to 1977; he would punctuate records with clips he had pre-recorded onto tape, which made him the first British DJ to mix sound, speech and comedy.7

An alternative was provided by Radio Luxembourg. It was the duchy’s national station, set up in 1929; unlike the BBC it was a commercial enterprise, and so it aimed to maximise its listenership and, in turn, its advertising revenue. From 1934 it started a regular schedule of English-language radio transmissions to Britain and Ireland from eight-fifteen in the mornings until midnight on Sundays, and at various times during the rest of the week. Programmes were recorded in London and flown out to be broadcast from Luxembourg. The station came into its own after the war – from autumn 1948, on Sunday nights when the BBC restricted itself to religious and heavyweight topics, Luxembourg played the Top 20 songs on the ‘hit parade’, based on sheet-music sales, beginning a British tradition that continues to this day.8

At the turn of the fifties there was still food rationing in Britain, and very little money for any kind of reconstruction. Everywhere there were bomb sites, physical reminders of terrible trauma. 1951 saw the Festival of Britain open on London’s semi-derelict South Bank, an exhibition of design, architecture and technology notable for its vivid colour, its modernism and its newness. After the festival closed, Britain was desperate to build on its success and spirit.

In November ’52 EMI launched the first 45s, and pop’s truest format – the firewood for future youth clubs, mobile discos and furtive fumbles at teenage parties – was born.9 The forty-five-revolutions-per-minute single was pressed on vinyl rather than the fragile, brittle shellac which had been used for 78s, the main recorded-music format for more than thirty years. Vinyl, boasted the sleeves of
the earliest EMI singles, was ‘unbreakable’ – it was lighter than shellac, too, and its microgrooves gave a much clearer, louder sound than 78s. Vinyl was also more portable, and hence more sociable. Twelve-inch vinyl albums, around since the late forties, were initially for adults: the cheaper, handier, less precious seven-inch would become the property of the teenager. EMI tentatively issued classical-only 45s at first, but they quickly realised the three- or four-minute playing time was much better suited to pop. EMI was the parent company to four pop labels – HMV, Columbia, Parlophone and MGM – and in January ’53 they issued, respectively, Eddie Fisher’s ‘I’m Yours’, Ray Martin’s ‘Blue Tango’, Humphrey Lyttelton’s ‘Out of the Galleon’ and Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney’s ‘A Couple of Swells’ as their opening shots; by the end of 1953 EMI had issued close to three hundred 45 rpm titles, and the raw materials for a revolution were in place.

Locking down seven-inch singles as a youth format, the portable Dansette record player was registered as a trademark in October 1952. Prior to this, record players were literally pieces of furniture, oak or mahogany, heavy and expensive; the radiogram, with its combined gramophone and wireless, was the size of a fridge. Until the fifties, electrical goods were classed as either ‘white’ (washing machines, fridges) or ‘brown’ (televisions, radios, gramophones). The Dansette was manufactured at a factory on Old Street in London’s East End; reflecting the primary colours of the Festival of Britain, it came in vivid red, blue, green, cream or pink leatherette. As the fifties progressed, the owner of the Dansette company, Samuel Margolin, was sharp enough to listen to teenagers, and he designed exactly what they wanted. He added an auto-changer, which meant singles could be stacked in a pile; Elvis would automatically be followed by Pat Boone or Duane Eddy, lined up and ready to be dropped automatically onto the turntable. The Dansette was party perfect.

America provided another building block of the modern pop world. The first magazine for teenagers, Seventeen, had been launched in 1944; though it was primarily aimed at girls and featured little on music, it was a start. In Britain, the only magazine to feature pop in 1952 was Picturegoer, which – as the name suggests – was primarily about movies. The record reviews were snippy about anything beyond Sinatra. Actress Janette Scott’s ‘Teen Page’ revealed she was ‘a bit of a disc fiend’, though she had no time for ‘criers and the arm-flappers and the rest … I know I’ll raise a bit of a storm here but I’m not really wild about Frankie Laine and Johnnie Ray.’

Unlike Janette Scott, though, much of Britain was pop hungry, and in need of refreshment.
One infamous post-war reaction to peacetime was the 1947 biker riot in Hollister, California, where ex-soldiers hopped up on speed were looking for the kinds of excitement and camaraderie they had found in the war. Amphetamines had been standard issue in the US army – this would later have grave consequences for modern pop’s first superstar, Elvis Presley.

Bobby Troup later wrote ‘Route 66’, associated with both Nat King Cole and the Rolling Stones, and produced Julie London’s exquisite ‘Cry Me a River’ (US no. 9 ’56, UK no. 22 ’57). London was so impressed with his work that she married Troup in 1961.

Les Baxter was a fascinating exception. He had been tenor-sax player with Artie Shaw and vocal arranger for Mel Tormé’s Mel-Tones, before he put together a small band in 1947 with novel instrumentation – ‘a cello, a French horn, a theremin, a rhythm section and a twelve-voice choir’ – for Harry Revel’s ten-inch album Music out of the Moon. ‘It was a little weird,’ he confessed. ‘I didn’t know what popular records were. I wanted to be innovative.’ He then split his career into adventurous self-composed albums like Ritual of the Savage (1951) and pleasant but straightforward arrangements for singles which resulted in US number-one hits – Nat King Cole’s ‘Too Young’ (1951), his own ‘Unchained Melody’ (1955) and ‘Poor People of Paris’ (1956), none of which he wrote. The one record which jumped the fence was Martin Denny’s ‘Quiet Village’ (US no. 4 ’59), a Baxter-written Tiki-influenced instrumental which became the touchstone for the ‘exotica’ revival in the nineties.

Block had borrowed both the name and concept of Make Believe Ballroom from a DJ called Al Jervis on KFWB in Hollywood, where Block had been an assistant.

An appearance on TV had far less impact. In the late forties TV shows were in their infancy; they were basically flat reproductions of radio shows, and did little to help sell records – compare staid clips of Kay Starr singing ‘Wheel of Fortune’ on TV in 1952 to the gorgeous, Technicolor musical scenes from Singin’ in the Rain the same year. What’s more, having your own TV variety show effectively meant you became a host, and were no longer a pop star. Dinah Shore discovered this in 1950; Cliff Richard, Cilla Black and Glen Campbell would later. The impact of TV would change dramatically in the late fifties and it would take a Briton, Jack Good, to draw its full pop potential.

Another reason for the change in the way pop music sounded was the decline of Broadway. It had been a solid provider of hit songs since the twenties, but took a steep drop in popularity in the early fifties. This must have seemed unlikely in
1950, when the new season brought Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *The King and I* (‘Getting to Know You’, ‘Shall We Dance’), Frank Loesser’s *Guys and Dolls* (‘If I Were a Bell’, ‘A Bushel and a Peck’) and Irving Berlin’s *Call Me Madam* (‘You’re Just in Love’), giving us a fresh clutch of standards. In 1951, though, all the new Broadway shows lost money. What happened? Possibly the cold war helped to foster a bunker mentality, with people happier staying at home with their new televisions, wireless radios and gramophones. What’s more, those radios would no longer have had live broadcasts by big bands playing the current Broadway hits, as they had done for the last twenty-odd years, and so a vital strand of publicity for shows was lost. The next big hit – 1954’s *The Pajama Game* – was quickly made into a film before the trail went cold.

7 When BBC Radio 1 started in 1967, Jackson was still around, and was referred to by Kenny Everett as ‘the daddy of all disc jockeys’.

8 The very first Top 20 countdown signature tune, pre-dating *Pick of the Pops* ‘At the Sign of the Swinging Cymbal’ (Brian Fahey) and *Top of the Pops* ‘Whole Lotta Love’ (CCS), was ‘Doodletown Fifers’ by the Sauter-Finegan Band on Radio Luxembourg.

9 Britain was one step removed from America, the birthplace of vinyl – the 33 rpm, twelve-inch long-playing record and the 45 rpm, seven-inch single. This meant Britain didn’t have to worry about the fraught and complex process that had gone into creating these formats: Columbia had first produced the LP in 1948 and RCA the seven-inch single in ’49 – both also made the machines on which the discs were played and, for some time, they refused to compromise and were at each other’s throats trying to win the ‘battle of the speeds’. Columbia called the 45 ‘unorthodox’; RCA’s David Sarnoff countered, ‘I challenge … anybody in the world to demonstrate that a seven-inch 33? record can produce the same kind of quality that a seven-inch 45 rpm record can and does produce’. *New York Times* critic Howard Taubman, writing in 1950, conceded that Sarnoff was right, but that the LP was better for ‘sheer listening comfort and continuity of performances’. The LP, initially, was perfect for classical music, and the 45 for pop.

10 33 rpm records were designed for longer music – expressly, classical symphonies – and hence had one kind of cultural value embedded. ‘Albums’, up to this point, had meant leaved or boxed collections of several 78s, like a stamp or photo album. So a 33 rpm long-player (or LP) was actually a replacement for the album, a whole that had previously been necessarily but awkwardly divided up on several shellac 78s, each side of which had a maximum
playing time of roughly five minutes. The terminology remained, with ‘LP’ and ‘album’ interchangeable.

11 Seventeen’s first editorial set out the terms for a youthquake: ‘You’re going to have to run this show – so the sooner you start thinking about it, the better. In a world that is changing as quickly and profoundly as ours is, we hope to provide a clearing house for your ideas.’ Those ideas took a good few years to filter through, but it was a launchpad. The magazine still exists today.
PART ONE
### Best Selling Pop Records in Britain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Last Week</th>
<th>This Week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 I LET'S HAVE ANOTHER PARTY</td>
<td>1 I HOLD MY HAND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winifred Atwell</td>
<td>(Philips)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 SANTO NATALE</td>
<td>2 IF I GIVE MY HEART TO YOU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Whitfield</td>
<td>(Decca)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I STILL BELIEVE</td>
<td>3 SANTO NATALE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronnie Hilton</td>
<td>(MGM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 THIS OLE HOUSE</td>
<td>4 THIS OLE HOUSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemary Clooney</td>
<td>(Decca)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 NO ONE BUT YOU</td>
<td>5 I CAN'T TELL A WAY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy Eckstine</td>
<td>A TANGO (MGM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 LET'S GET TOGETHER</td>
<td>6 MR. SANDMAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Ben Banjo Band</td>
<td>(Columbia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 FINGER OF SUSPICION</td>
<td>7 THERE MUST BE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dickie Valentine</td>
<td>(Columbia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 MY SON, MY SON</td>
<td>8 VENI VIDI VICI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vera Lynn with Frank Weir</td>
<td>8 SMILE (Theme from Times')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 RAIN, RAIN, RAIN</td>
<td>9 HAPPY WANDERER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankie Laine</td>
<td>(Philips)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 HEARTBEAT</td>
<td>10 MY FRIEND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruby Murray</td>
<td>(Columbia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 HOLD MY HAND</td>
<td>11 NO ONE BUT YOU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don. Cornell</td>
<td>(Vogue/Coral)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 THIS OLE HOUSE</td>
<td>12 LITTLE THINGS MUST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billie Anthony</td>
<td>(Columbia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 SHAKE, RATTLE AND ROLL</td>
<td>13 SKY BLUE SHIRT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Haley</td>
<td>(Brunswick)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 IF I GIVE MY HEART TO YOU</td>
<td>13 RAINBOW TIE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joan Reigan</td>
<td>(Decca)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 I CAN'T TELL A WALTZ FROM A TANGO</td>
<td>17 COUNT YOUR BLES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma Cogan</td>
<td>STEAD OF SHEEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 VENI, VIDI, VICI</td>
<td>(HMV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronnie Hilton</td>
<td>18 I STILL BELIEVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 MR. SANDMAN</td>
<td>(MGM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chordettes</td>
<td>18 I LOVE PARIS (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 I NEED YOU NOT</td>
<td>19 THE STORY OF THE HIGH AND THE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Columbia)</td>
<td>19 (Macn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20 THE HIGH AND THE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DECEMBER, 1954

HIT PARADE

DORIS DAY
ROSEMARY CLOONEY
TED HEATH
ALMA COGAN
write personal articles

JOHNNIE RAY'S
LIFE-STORY IN
STRIP-CARTOON

Special feature articles:

JUDY GARLAND
DANNY KAYE
RAY ANTHONY
BING CROSBY

YOUR OWN
FAN CLUB PAGE

PRIZE CROSSWORD

COMPLETE
RADIO LUXEMBOURG
PROGRAMMES

2/-

Special illustrated story:
GERALDO
and His Orchestra
For Britain, the modern pop era began in 1952. Not only was it the year the first seven-inch singles were released, and the nation’s most significant and longest-running music paper – the *New Musical Express* – was first published, but on November 14th the *NME* printed the first singles chart. All three creations would become cornerstones of the pop world until their simultaneous decline in the nineties, as the digital era got into its stride. The singles chart in particular – or the ‘hit parade’ as it was called in the fifties, borrowing American terminology – had a special appeal to the British sensibility.

It meant competition, excitement in league-table form, pop music as a sport. It would pit Frankie Laine against Johnnie Ray, Blur against Oasis, Brits against Yanks, Decca against EMI; it would become fuel for a nation obsessed with train numbers and cricket statistics. The charts dictated what you heard on the radio, what you saw on TV, how high your heroes’ stock had risen. For over four decades they would be a national fixture in Britain, like the FA Cup, like Christmas.

The barely documented years between 1945 and 1954 are pop’s Dark Ages, invisible and obscure. If it’s remembered at all, it’s as a period of stagnation, a stop-gap between the swing era and the rock era, full of identikit balladeers, stars of their day who have all but vanished from collective memory. Tony Brent? Billie Anthony? Would anyone remember Eddie Fisher if he hadn’t married so well and so often? Or Ruby Murray if her name hadn’t become rhyming slang for the national dish? It’s a period I find oddly attractive because of its persistent obscurity. Though the songs are largely forgotten, the first UK chart contained a mix of genres (country, ballads, instrumentals, film themes, exotic novelties, poster-boy pop) which would recur throughout the following decades. For Justin Timberlake, there was Johnnie Ray; for ‘My Heart Will Go On’, the theme from *High Noon*; for ‘The Ketchup Song’, see ‘Cowpuncher’s Cantata’.

All of these singles were released on shellac 78s – only Mario Lanza’s ‘Because You’re Mine’ was available in the shops on a seven-inch in November 1952, as EMI had just issued it as one of their very first 45 rpm singles. It is also notable how US-dominated the chart was, with only Vera Lynn, Max Bygraves and band leader Ray Martin from Britain.

Britain’s inferiority complex was tangible, even when it tried to promote itself. The sleevenotes to Tony Brent’s *Off Stage* album claimed he was ‘above the local, in the international class; he is one of the few British vocalists who come within hailing distance of Sinatra or Cole’. Eddie Calvert, who scored a solitary US Top 10 hit in 1954, had similarly humble words printed on the back cover of *The Man with the Golden Trumpet*: ‘At one time, not very long ago, the idea of a British
musician making a record that would sell hundreds of thousands in the United States, the home of modern popular music, was in the nature of a fantasy.‘

In 1952 Britain had little self-confidence, then, and no reason to believe it could compete with the likes of pert, blonde, virginal Doris Day, square-jawed cowboy Frankie Laine, Italian operatic import Mario Lanza or Bing Crosby, king of the crooners, and now twenty-odd years at the top. America was a country of conspicuous wealth and immaculately turned out stars of stage and screen; pockmarked Britain was still awaiting redevelopment seven years after the end of the war. Hollywood in 1952 meant Ava Gardner and Gregory Peck in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, and Gary Cooper as the ultimate good guy in *High Noon*; Gene Barry stirred up fears of unimaginable disaster in *The Atomic City*; Gene Kelly’s *Singin’ in the Rain* was the year’s hit musical. Britain, meanwhile, had Michael Redgrave starring in an adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* – a great story and a fine movie, but really ... The only hint of local danger came from bad girl Diana Dors, who starred as a thieving teenage seductress in *The Last Page*. There was no suggestion whatsoever of an imminent, and remarkable, convergence of British and American pop culture.

That was all yet to come. Let’s try to picture pop music at the dawn of vinyl, in the days before rock ‘n’ roll, and see what we can learn from the very first hit parade. Though it was a Top 12, three positions were tied, and so the first chart featured fifteen singles.

1 Al Martino, ‘Here in My Heart’ (Capitol CL 13779)

The war had caused massive upheaval for the big bands that had dominated popular music in the thirties and forties. They had been decimated on three fronts: by individuals who had been called up and sometimes lost in service; by jazz’s leftfield move into bop, which was hard to dance to (tempos were often too fast or too slow) and consequently had less mass appeal than swing; and by financial constraints. The fall in cinema attendances hurt, too – in the thirties and forties many bands had played in theatres before a movie, which had effectively subsidised their performance. The rise of television after the war put paid to this. There were fewer venues, and consequently less money, available – out of necessity bands became smaller, or simply split. By 1950 the better-known singers, rather than touring the country and playing theatres with a big band as they had done, now played in exclusive clubs; radio and TV presence aside, they became almost invisible to the general public.
The new breed of solo singer who benefited in the post-war, pre-rock era included the voluble Italian American Al Martino. ‘Here in My Heart’ was his very first single, released in America on a tiny Philadelphia label called BBS. He’d been a bricklayer and was injured at Iwo Jima in the war, but his dream was to emulate family friend Mario Lanza. He got his break in 1952, when he came first on Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts, singing Perry Como’s ‘If’, a US number one from the previous year. ‘Here in My Heart’ went to number one in the States in June ’52, he was quickly signed by Capitol, and it was issued in the UK on a 78, where it would spend nine weeks at number one – to date, only five singles have spent more weeks at the top.

You’d have expected Martino’s career to be sustained, but his management contract was bought out by the mafia and he fled to Britain, where he headlined the London Palladium and had regular hits for the next couple of years (including the epically tortured ‘Rachel’, no. 10 ’53). But the London Palladium wasn’t Madison Square Garden. He returned to the US in 1960, scored a few more hits (‘I Love You Because’, US no. 3 ’63) and later starred in The Godfather. He did OK, but nothing was on the same scale as ‘Here in My Heart’.

Al Martino’s instant fame was unusual and – coming via TV – something quite new. His British light-opera counterpart was David Whitfield. Aside from his navy years, Whitfield had never made it out of Hull, where he worked in the concrete business before obtaining a deal with Decca. His blubbing, rubbery voice would ordinarily have been thought laughable, a disgrace to opera and pop alike, but instead he became the best-selling British star of the era.

How did this happen? Whitfield looked like a grandfather while still in his mid-twenties. He was from one of Britain’s dullest cities and had cement in his fingernails but, in pop, none of this mattered. What did matter was that Whitfield had entered the first Opportunity Knocks talent show on Radio Luxembourg, and won, which made him the godfather of an ignoble pop strand. He was Britain’s first Pop Idol, the original X Factor champion, and wasn’t off the charts for four years, scoring two number ones and nine more Top 10 hits between 1953 and ’57 by squashing Richard Tauber, religion and readymix sincerity into singles like ‘The Book’, ‘Bridge of Sighs’ and ‘My September Love’. In 1954 his ‘Cara Mia’ was number one for ten weeks. The week it hit the top, food rationing finally ended. Little else could explain a rash national leap into the arms of ‘Cara Mia’ and its feeble Italianate promise: overcooked spaghetti bolognese washed down with milky coffee. After so many battleship-grey years, this must have seemed
exotic. ‘At home they used to say I was better than Tauber,’ Whitfield said. ‘Now the kids tear my clothes. I don’t mind really. It comes off income tax, for a start.’

2 Jo Stafford, ‘You Belong to Me’ (Columbia DB 3152)

If the war had any positive effect on pop it was to create a desire to stretch beyond Anglo-American music hall and the big-band set-up. The British working classes had been sent to far-flung parts of the world and, while they may have had no desire to return to Burma, it meant they had come home with tales of mischief and freshness. This was reflected in a bunch of hits that had a foreign intrigue: ‘Istanbul’, ‘West of Zanzibar’, ‘Cara Mia’, ‘Granada’, ‘Poor People of Paris’. They made no concessions to ethnic accuracy – Rosemary Clooney’s ‘Mambo Italiano’ spoofed them neatly – but they scratched an itch we hadn’t had before.

Best of the lot was ‘You Belong to Me’ by Jo Stafford, a gorgeous travelogue-cum-love song floating on a jetstream of marimbas. ‘Fly the ocean in a silver plane, see the jungle when it’s wet with rain.’ The performance was cool, and worked a treat if you found restraint sexier than blatant emotionality. Her delivery was languid yet precise, and her pitching was perfect, but there was steel in her seduction: ‘Send me photographs and souvenirs but just remember, when a dream appears, you belong to me.’ You didn’t mess with Jo.

She could have been singing to a high-flying executive – or maybe a representative of the newly formed United Nations – at the dawn of the jet age. Or her lover could have been a soldier. The music of 1952 was the music of the generation who had been in the war, and if some craved more of the same excitement and exotica, plenty craved calm, reserve and culture that hinted more than it blared. The later idea that modern pop was all about the spreading around of forbidden knowledge didn’t really count in the decade after the war ended, when there was pretty good reason for people not to be sharing the things they’d learnt in the Pacific or in Europe.

3 Nat King Cole, ‘Somewhere along the Way’ (Capitol CL 13774)

In the pre-rock fifties, for the first time, pop records were produced rather than just recorded. The prime concern of recording engineers had always been to replicate a live recording as closely as possible; 1950 brought the first hit records that faded out (Teresa Brewer’s ‘Music Music Music’, Bing Crosby’s ‘Mule Train’,
Frankie Laine’s ‘Cry of the Wild Goose’). This was a technique which had been used in films to cut between scenes and on lengthy jazz recordings that were split over two sides of a disc, but never had it been done just because it sounded good. The same year had produced Patti Page’s ‘Tennessee Waltz’, on which ‘the Singing Rage’ was double-tracked, harmonising with herself. It was released on Mercury, whose head of A&R Mitch Miller was in favour of using the studio and its capabilities as an instrument in itself. Miller had been experimenting with overdubbing since 1948, but ‘Tennessee Waltz’ was an entirely new sound to most listeners and sold seven million copies. Guitarist Les Paul had previously double-tracked his playing on record; with his wife Mary Ford he went to town with overdubbing, both on their voices and his guitar, to create a string of atomic-age hits in the early fifties: ‘How High the Moon’, ‘Mockingbird Hill’, ‘Vaya con Dios’.

‘Somewhere along the Way’ features an arrangement by Capitol Records’ Nelson Riddle that plucks, sweeps and mourns beneath the despair of the singer. It’s autumnal, and has moments of both stridency (the severity of the intro) and intimacy – at times it almost disappears completely. It’s a full and remarkable production.

Nat King Cole had been a respected jazz pianist before switching to orchestrated ballads in the late forties, cutting a long string of records that were purpose-built to couch and caress his extraordinary voice. Whereas David Whitfield was keen for you to know that he was straining every sinew to get his point across, Cole had the knack of sounding as if he was ad-libbing songs as he went along. There is a richness to ‘Somewhere along the Way’, and his restraint is similar to Jo Stafford’s, but Cole was rarely a seducer. Usually, he was to be found in the near distance, there to accompany the wooing of other couples (‘When I Fall in Love’, ‘Let There Be Love’) or to tell stories of other unfortunates and outsiders (‘Ballerina’, ‘Nature Boy’), but he was at his most effective when he had lost in love, was resigned and melancholy. This was where his silvered but weary voice excelled: ‘Pretend’ (UK and US no. 2 ‘53), ‘Smile’ (US no. 10, UK no. 2 ‘54), ‘A Blossom Fell’ (US no. 2, UK no. 3 ‘55); ultimately, there was ‘Stardust’.

‘Somewhere along the Way’ has the same sense of unforgettable loss as ‘Stardust’, the definitive Cole ballad from his 1957 album Love Is the Thing. Cole runs his fingers lightly down the keys, echoing the line ‘I used to walk with you, along the avenue,’ and in his delivery you hear the deep-blue sounds of Roy Orbison and Scott Walker to come. At one point the brushed drums and Riddle’s understanding strings leave him alone at the piano, briefly, to sing, ‘I should
forget, but with the loneliness of night I start remembering ... everything.’ And in that last ‘everything’ there’s despair, possibly lust, a whole relationship wrapped inside three syllables. There is also more than a suggestion of soul. As much as David Whitfield and Al Martino look backwards, right back to Caruso, ‘Somewhere along the Way’ looks forward, to Marvin Gaye, to Luther Vandross, to R. Kelly.

4 Bing Crosby, ‘The Isle of Innisfree’ (Brunswick 04900)

Bing Crosby had been the king of the singers since the late twenties, the man who’d made an art form out of crooning. On the American charts, he had accumulated 341 hits between 1931 and the release of ‘The Isle of Innisfree’ in 1952, yet this single didn’t chart there at all and he would only have one more US Top 10 hit – ‘True Love’, a duet with Grace Kelly (UK no. 4, US no. 3 ’56). Crosby had been the single biggest singing influence in pop before 1952, thanks to the advent of electronic recording, which had allowed his warm, gentle voice to be preserved on 78.

As Crosby approached fifty, a crop of younger singers were set to usurp their elder. There was the buttery Don Cornell (‘Hold My Hand’, UK no. 1, US no. 3 ’54), the philandering Eddie Fisher (‘Outside of Heaven’ and ‘I’m Walking Behind You’, both UK no. 1 in ’53), Al Martino’s more mellow counterpart Dean Martin and, smoothest and most successful of all, Perry Como. Como had started out with the Ted Weems band in the early forties. He was a seventh son of a seventh son from Pennsylvania, and you couldn’t make up how clean and good he was. Aged eleven he was helping out in the local barber shop to supplement the family income; by sixteen he had his own shop and sang to his customers. The barber of civility. By 1943 Como had a solo contract with RCA and was made for life, selling sixty million records in his own unhurried way, only quitting in the eighties. ‘Magic Moments’, ‘Wanted’, ‘Idle Gossip’, ‘Catch a Falling Star’ – his voice was downy and comforting, never excitable or exciting. He communicated security and a short back and sides, and he summed up the early fifties’ friendly persuasion but also its lack of thrills, of any raw emotion. A 1956 poll claimed Como as America’s ideal husband, but he was no one’s ideal lover.

‘The Isle of Innisfree’ was a peculiar song. Irish ballads had been hits since the dawn of recorded music, there to provide a constant comfort, memories of the old world; they would remain an irregular chart presence right through to hits like the Fureys’ ‘When You Were Sweet Sixteen’ (UK no. 14 ’81). Verdant fields, village greens, tall oak trees – their vision was defiantly non-urban. Bing had periodically
recorded songs of old Ireland – ‘Tobermory Bay’, ‘Danny Boy’ and ‘Galway Bay’, the last of which had been number one in the UK sheet-music charts for twenty-two weeks in 1948 – and ‘The Isle of Innisfree’ similarly brims with nostalgia and the trauma of separation.

The catch is that Innisfree doesn’t actually exist – William Butler Yeats created the utopian, fictional Lake Isle of Innisfree in an 1888 poem, and the song’s author, Dick Farrelly, borrowed its imagery. So when Bing Crosby is singing from the heart of a city in which he can ‘scarcely feel its wonder or its laughter’, he is Billy Fisher, dreaming of Ambrosia, or Richard Brautigan’s detective C. Card, adrift in his own Babylon. He isn’t escaping into the fog of the past, but into an imaginary wonderland. Modern pop would likewise follow him into new utopian ports of pleasure: Brian Wilson created Surf City, with two girls for every boy; in 1967 the Who’s dreamscape was Armenia City in the Sky (‘If you’re troubled and you can’t relax, close your eyes and think of this’); Martha and the Muffins’ Echo Beach was a new-wave escape route from the nine-to-five (‘my job is very boring – I’m an office clerk’); Lipps Inc found disco nirvana in Funkytown (US no. 1, UK no. 2 ‘80); while Guns n’ Roses’ Paradise City – ‘where the grass is green and the girls are pretty’ – sounded remarkably like Innisfree.

‘Soon I’m back to stern reality.’ Bing’s reverie – like any dream, like the greatest night of your life – couldn’t last forever. Reality in 1952 meant couples working things out after the inevitable infidelities of separation, families trying to patch themselves together after the horrors of war, at home and abroad. When Crosby sang about Innisfree offering ‘a peace no other land could know’, he may even have been singing about death itself.

5 Guy Mitchell, ‘Feet Up’ (Columbia DB 3151)

Another way through the post-war malaise was to celebrate the family – mums, dads and kids, just the way it used to be. There was a remarkable number of songs about babies in the decade after the war: Rosemary Clooney’s ‘Where Will the Dimple Be’ (UK no. 6 ‘55), Alma Cogan’s ‘Twenty Tiny Fingers’ (UK no. 17 ‘55), and this raucous singalong. On ‘Feet Up’, Guy Mitchell wasn’t shy in sharing his wayward past – ‘I’ve been known to gamble, take a little drink ... but now my rootin’ tootin’ days are done. Gotta be the man that he thinks I am, ‘cos I love my son!’ He dangled the poor kid in the air to ‘pat him on the po-po’, while bragging that he ‘knew a lot of women’ in his dog days; he also claimed ‘my girl Rosie ain’t that kind’, leaving you to ponder the kind of floozies he’d been spending time with.
In 1952 everybody in Britain secretly wanted to be American. You only had to hear a Guy Mitchell record to know what America was like, and it’s telling that he carried on having major hit singles in the UK after his star waned at home (‘Feet Up’ reached number two here but only number fourteen in the States). Mitchell was a man who always wore his hat at a jaunty angle, the kind of fella who would say ‘Sure!’ to pretty much anything. Though he usually painted himself as Jack the Lad, his songs were like Southern cooking, collard greens and biscuits, and everything loaded with sugar because the sun has got his hat on and life’s a beach: ‘Pretty Little Black Eyed Susie’ (no. 2 ’53), ‘She Wears Red Feathers’ (no. 1 ’53), ‘Cloud Lucky Seven’ (no. 2 ’54) – they oozed bonhomie. ‘Feet Up’ featured swanee whistles and a laughing solo. It was hard to believe there was a war on in Korea.

‘Feet Up’ was written by a man who could stake a claim to be the king of pre-rock, Bob Merrill. Legend has it that his first attempt at songwriting was rejected by a publisher as too complex, so he went home and wrote, ‘If I knew you were comin’ I’d have baked a cake, howdja do, howdja doo, howdja doo.’ It became a US number one for Eileen Barton in 1950.

By 1953 Bob Merrill was the best-selling composer in the world, the heir to Hoagy Carmichael, Cole Porter and Sammy Cahn, with million-sellers like ‘Feet Up’, ‘(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window’, ‘Mambo Italiano’ and ‘Where Will the Dimple Be’, all composed on a toy xylophone. The other perceived enemy of the Great American Songbook was A&R man Mitch Miller, by now at Columbia Records and Merrill’s number-one fan, who coerced his artists – Jo Stafford, Rosemary Clooney, Guy Mitchell, Patti Page – into singing these family-friendly novelties. The rise of the solo singer and the growing significance of record sales over sheet music in the early fifties had enabled record-label executives like Miller to wrest control of the music industry from the old publishing firms. Effectively he became the first pop manager, cultivating the careers of his charges and picking their singles; Miller’s approach would be a foundation stone of the new vinyl-based music industry. Frank Sinatra, with his career at rock bottom, had been convinced to cut ‘Mama Will Bark’ with a pack of dogs in 1953; in 1954 he bought his way out of his Columbia contract rather than stay under Miller’s thumb. A few years later, with Sinatra in his Capitol-era pomp, the two met in a hotel lobby. As Miller extended his hand, Sinatra snapped, ‘Fuck you, keep walking.’

6 Rosemary Clooney, ‘Half as Much’ (Columbia DB 3129)
Of the female stars of the early fifties – too prim and preened to be called girls – Kay Starr, Doris Day, Patti Page and Rosemary Clooney were dominant. Once in a while they broke rank and caused a raised eyebrow – Jo Stafford sang ‘Make Love to Me’ in 1954 and got a BBC ban for her troubles – but largely they were as much a post-war comfort blanket as the men. Doris sang sweet, Patti sang country, Kay sang ‘Comes Along a Love’ (UK no. 1 ’53), a fabulous proto-rocker with a walking bassline. Part Native American, she had a strong dark look, like the older sister of a girl you fancied, and was clearly someone who wouldn’t stand for wallflowers at her house party. Rosemary Clooney, likewise, set herself up as more than a little saucy on ‘Come On a My House’, the biggest record of 1951, co-written by Armenian American novelist William Saroyan. Mitch Miller helmed it, backing Clooney with a manic, distorted harpsichord. ‘I’m gonna give you Easter egg,’ she sang, licking her lips. ‘I’m gonna give you everything.’

‘Half as Much’ was a ballad written by country’s premier songwriter, Hank Williams, who would collapse and die on New Year’s Day 1953. That he never scored a bigger hit than ‘Jambalaya’ (US no. 20 ’52) was down to the segregation of the American chart. Before submitting record sales, Billboard magazine would ask shops to divide them into pop, hillbilly (later country and western) and race (later rhythm and blues, or R&B). This made it almost impossible for music on the outside of white, urban pop to break into the charts. Hank Williams’s ‘Jambalaya’ spent fourteen weeks at number one in the country chart, so presumably sufficient retailers considered it big enough to count as a pop record and filed its sales as such. This musical apartheid would eventually be corrected with the introduction of the Top 100 (soon renamed the Hot Hundred) in 1955, which counted all record sales towards the pop chart. The American singles chart, however, was further complicated by its combination of record sales, jukebox plays, radio plays and – at least in the fifties – sheet-music sales. It lacked the clarity of the British pop chart, which was, and would remain, purely sales based.

Was Rosie buttering us up to become a nation of country-music fans? Despite the fact that the UK isn’t meant to ‘get’ country and western, ‘Half as Much’ would be followed into the chart by her cover of ‘Jambalaya’, the Midwestern swing of Bonnie Lou’s ‘Tennessee Wig Walk’ (no. 4 ’53) and Ruby Wright’s ‘Bimbo’ (no. 7 ’54), neither of which registered in the States at all (though Bonnie Lou had a number-six hit on the country-and-western chart).

7 Frankie Laine, ‘High Noon’ (Columbia DB 3113)
Westerns were another reason for the unlikely incursions of country music into the UK charts. ‘High Noon’ was the theme to a film in which sheriff Gary Cooper is ‘torn between love and duty’. Though Tex Ritter sang it on the soundtrack, Frankie Laine had the hit – he was already the foremost purveyor of this kind of dark epic. With a choral caravan of courage behind him he sings, over a lazy clip-clop beat that could be a death march, ‘I do not know what fate awaits me ... I must face a man who hates me, or lie a craven coward in my grave.’

What darkness there was in the music of 1952 came almost entirely from this square-jawed, geometric man with a letter-box mouth. Frankie Laine had won a marathon dance contest in 1932 and smashed the world record, going for 145 consecutive days. Everything he did was on this scale. His songs were pure Hollywood, set under swirling, swollen skies in bleak dustbowl settings: ‘Cool Water’, ‘Where the Winds Blow’, ‘The Cry of the Wild Goose’. Laine was pop’s Gregory Peck, a tortured stoic, a lion with a thorn in his toe, not any old loser in love but a man who’d had his heart physically ripped out by Jezebel. On ‘Blowin’ Wild’ (UK no. 2 ’55) he was tormented to the brink of insanity by his woman after, improbably, they’d struck oil in their back garden; Laine roars his pain over a backing of doodlebug brass and a howling, near-atonal chorus. His biggest hits, though, were less apocalyptic – ‘Answer Me’ and ‘I Believe’ were safe, ship-steadying ballads that smelt of church and stayed at number one for months in ’53 and ’54.4

=7 Vera Lynn, ‘Forget Me Not’ (Decca F 9985)

The forces’ sweetheart of World War Two had three songs on the first British hit parade. She had barely registered a record sale since the end of the war, but Korea brought her back into the chart. 1952 had seen the Battle of White Horse, the Battle of Old Baldy and the Battle of Triangle Hill, all of which sounded like Frankie Laine hits in waiting. In November ’52 president elect Dwight Eisenhower flew to Korea to kick-start ceasefire negotiations, UN fighting all but stopped, and the war would finally end the following July.

‘Forget Me Not’ was Vera Lynn’s third hit of the year, and was incredibly, impressively dirge-like – its melody recalled ‘The Last Post’ and, though it started with a sprig of flighty strings, like something from I Dream of Jeannie, the tempo soon dropped like a stone; Vera sounded distant, echoing, a ghost of Christmas future; eventually the song simply faded away, with the haunted vocals of the Johnson Singers (one of whom wrote the song) trailing behind her, walking slowly into the distance and the darkness. Joe Meek would have been doing his national
service in 1952, as an RAF radar technician, and he’d have been listening to the thunder of ‘High Noon’ and the desolation of ‘Forget Me Not’; almost a decade later he would be recycling and renewing their impact on John Leyton’s ‘Johnny Remember Me’.

Doris Day and Frankie Laine, ‘Sugarbush’ (Columbia DB 3123)

The summer of 1954 brought Britain’s first pop-music magazine aimed at teenagers, a proto-Smash Hits called Hit Parade, with posters, news, gossip and reviews, and its first cover star was Doris Day. Up to this point, pop fans had to make do with the weightier music papers, the NME and Melody Maker, both of which were effectively specialist newspapers, or the odd article in Picturegoer and Picture Show, but they had never had a magazine of their own. The first Hit Parade featured Frankie Laine’s life story in strip cartoon, the whole month’s listings for Radio Luxembourg (Sunday June 27th: 7.30 Guy Mitchell Sings for You; 9.15 The Alka Seltzer Show – details to be announced; 11.00 Top Twenty), a Johnnie Ray feature (‘I want to marry a British girl’) and ‘Hit Parade’s June Pin-Up’, Doris Day, who was celebrating her current number-one hit, ‘Secret Love’.

The only comparable US magazine was the similarly titled Hit Parader, which paid far less attention to detail and was almost entirely made up of lyrics to the current hits. In October ’54 the NME expanded its hit parade from a Top 12 to a Top 20; the following month the Daily Mirror ran a readers’ poll to celebrate ‘the fabulous world of the gramophone record’. A hundred thousand voters picked Ronnie Hilton as best newcomer, and Winifred Atwell as best instrumentalist; they played in front of seven thousand people at the Daily Mirror Disc Festival. Up to this point singers and bands had performed at summer seasons, pantomimes and Royal Variety Performances – strictly adult territory. The Mirror was clearly aiming at teenagers and, for Christmas 1954, it published Discland, a hardback book and Britain’s first pop annual: ‘Today the spinning disc is the number-one force in show business. The names of recording stars are as familiar around the house as salt, mustard or vinegar. The stars come right into your homes.’

Back in 1952 Doris Day had been singing the flirtatious ‘Sugarbush’, a record that – had the chart existed – would have been a hit a few weeks earlier for Eve Boswell, a British-based, Hungarian-born singer. Boswell was a classically trained pianist who also played the saxophone and the clarinet, had mastered tap dancing and the odd ballet step, and would record an album (Sugar and Spice,
1956) that featured songs in nine different languages. In Blackpool, she once appeared on stage by jumping through a paper hoop while juggling. Somehow – maybe unsurprisingly – she always gave the impression of having ladders in her tights; her only hit would turn out to be the daffy ‘Pickin’ a Chicken’ (UK no. 9 ’55).

Doris Day, on the other hand, cut duets with Frankie Laine and Johnnie Ray, starred in a Hitchcock film with James Stewart, co-starred in further movies with Rock Hudson and James Garner, became a gay icon for her role in Calamity Jane, set up the Doris Day Animal League in the seventies (which introduced the annual Spay Day USA), and had a son, Terry, who went on to produce the Byrds and would have been a victim of the Manson family if he had been at home one night in 1969.

While Doris got to smooch Rock Hudson, earn an Academy Award nomination and receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the enchanting Eve got to do a summer season in Southport with ‘TV’s Mad Magician’ Tommy Cooper. This was the state of Britain in the early fifties – strictly end of the pier.

=8 Ray Martin, ‘Blue Tango’ (Columbia DB 3051)

So-called light music has its own values ... it acts as a series of vials, often charmingly shaped and coloured, for the distillations of memory. The first few bars of it remove the stopper; we find ourselves re-living, not remembering but magically re-living, some exact moments of our past.

J. B. Priestley

The other major difference between post-war Britain and post-war America was the empire, or rather the end of the empire. Previously, the British working classes had had the option of escaping from their back-to-back terraces via the colonial office, to Canada, India, Africa; you could make your way, reinvent your life. In 1947 India became independent, and suddenly there were fewer places to visit. Our playground would have to be on our doorstep.

This may explain the popularity of instrumentals, the other major pre-rock trend. For one thing, they were, like songs about kids and burgeoning happy families, a way of avoiding mentioning the war – this made them safe choices for BBC radio. Also, they covered much of the ground that Jo Stafford’s silver plane flew over, foreign climes which were now out of the reach of many Britons: Norrie Paramor’s ‘April in Portugal’, Winifred Atwell’s ‘Poor People of Paris’, Frank Chacksfield’s ‘In Old Lisbon’, Lou Busch’s ‘Zambezi’ and Mantovani’s 1953 number one, ‘Moulin Rouge’.
The orchestrated instrumentals were called ‘light music’, a melodic, digestible, atmospheric style that sat between pop and classical, and after which the BBC’s Light Programme had been named in 1945. British band leader Ray Martin was your tour guide on ‘Swedish Rhapsody’ (UK no. 4 ‘53), a piece of music that was fifty years old and genuinely Swedish, but was chirpy in the extreme, much like his ‘Blue Tango’ with its accordion, skipping strings and light South American pitter-patter beat.

Other instrumentals on the chart – Cyril Stapleton’s ‘Blue Star’, Leroy Anderson’s ‘Forgotten Dreams’, Les Baxter’s ‘Unchained Melody’ – worked as balm, lullabies for wrecked communities. They tucked a nation into bed while the new world was constructed outside their window. The record that epitomised early-fifties Britain was German in origin – Eddie Calvert’s ‘Oh Mein Papa’, which spent nine weeks at number one in early 1954. Redolent of bottle-green paint and utility furniture, I imagine it on the Light Programme’s morning show Housewives’ Choice, mirroring a yearning for romantic ballroom clinches (maybe with Calvert himself, the Man with the Golden Trumpet and the Brylcreemed hair), a yearning for something, anything, to aid escape from austerity Britain. It has an otherworldliness – which its village-hall organ aggressively attempts to ground – that stems from Calvert’s rather wayward blowing; not exactly jazz but still straying into dreamy, lonesome bullfighter territory. Certainly, it is quite an abstruse take on a tribute to a dead father.

Instrumentals were for the mass of grown-ups who had experienced quite enough heart-projecting action between 1939 and 1945. For many kids, though, the war had been a constant adventure – they may not have been economically independent, but it had left them a private world of bomb sites, dens built in half-destroyed houses which, for adults, were no-go areas. Their older brothers, though, had gone off to war, and returned as adults with shared experiences, creating an unbridgeable generational divide between them and their siblings.

Those who had experienced the awful realities of armed conflict understood ‘Oh Mein Papa’ and ‘Blue Tango’; those who hadn’t shunned this adult music. It would occasionally resurface, like a buried childhood memory, even decades later, suggesting there was something in the British psyche that needed these soothing, atmospheric instrumentals – the Shadows’ ‘Wonderful Land’, Fleetwood Mac’s ‘Albatross’, 808 State’s ‘Pacific State’. Their moment of dominance, though, was long gone. Listening to Mantovani’s ‘Moulin Rouge’ is to realise that something significant was lost as well as gained in the rock ‘n’ roll era.
9 Vera Lynn, ‘The Homing Waltz’ (Decca F 9959)

At her 1940s peak, Vera Lynn’s main rivals had been the rumbustious Gracie Fields and the sweet, much younger Ann Shelton, wartime heroines whose careers turned to charity work in peacetime, or at least until there was another conflict to rouse the British blood – Shelton scored a UK number one with the grinning, khaki-clad ‘Lay Down Your Arms’ in 1956, just as the Suez crisis threatened to become a full-blown war. By the early fifties, though, there were several other British girls waiting to steal Vera and Ann’s glory.

American stars had the lip gloss, the nylons and the best suits, the accoutrements of class and style. Post-war Britain was another story. Big ball gowns, bigger and fruitier than everyone else’s, that was Alma Cogan’s shtick. She wasn’t especially pretty, and got through by smiling a lot and playing up the cute catch in her voice. She scored hits with chirpy, brass-driven material like ‘Never Do a Tango with an Eskimo’ (no. 6 ’56) and ‘Dreamboat’ (no. 1 ’55) – on which she serenades her lover as if he was an Airedale puppy – but she could also take American R&B hits like LaVern Baker’s ‘Tweedle Dee’ and Fats Domino’s ‘I’m in Love Again’ and present them to a music-hall crowd at the Golders Green Hippodrome without anyone getting alarmed. That was new and brave and, decades later, people still admired her for it.6

Lita Roza was notably more glamorous, with her boyish haircut and catlike grace. She was a Scouser, her dad was a Spanish docker, and she’d risen to prominence singing with the Ted Heath band. When she went solo in 1952, Lita cut albums like Listening in the After-hours and Love Is the Answer, titles that spelt out her name. Her best songs – ‘Allentown Jail’, ‘Hey There’, ‘Leave Me Alone’ – had a mink and smoke-ringed atmosphere that perfectly conjured up the make-do-and-mend glamour of fifties Soho, all cool seduction with hints of illegality. You heard none of this in the voice of Ruby Murray, the breakthrough star of 1955. Genuinely, she seemed like a naif, an Irish colleen whispering ‘Softly, Softly’, a number one, like a stuttering schoolgirl. Britain quickly took to her fluttering eyelashes; at one point in the spring of ’55 she had five singles in the Top 20,7 and was something of a (very quiet) pop explosion. But blushing cheeks could only take her so far. Ill-advised duets with Norman Wisdom were not the way forward. The public had already tired of her by 1956, after which she hit the bottle and sank from view.

Accessibility was often the key to a British pop star’s success. Unlike America, British singers in the early fifties still hoofed around the country playing on variety
bills. If Frank Sinatra wasn’t around, then you’d have to make do with ‘the British Frank Sinatra’, another former singer with the Ted Heath band called Dickie Valentine. Of the wave of pre-rock singers who made the British bobby-soxers shriek and sigh, Orson Welles lookalike Valentine was the most interesting. On stage, he would begin his set in a mellow mood – with sleepy ballads like ‘All the Time and Everywhere’ (UK no. 9 ‘53) – then he’d crank it up and sing like Johnnie Ray one minute, Mario Lanza the next, Edward G. Robinson for pudding. It was a weird act, but it made him extremely popular. ‘I’m a Jekyll and Hyde, you see,’ he explained. ‘As Dickie Valentine I feel shy and handcuffed. It’s when I’m imitating others, when I’m not myself, that I can throw myself about the stage.’ You can almost hear Morrissey in that quote. If Dickie had emerged three years later, he might have made more interesting records. As it was, he only cut a handful – ‘Finger of Suspicion’ was the best, all waxed-moustache charm, a three-minute chat-up line, and it made number one in December ‘54. Unable to shift with the rock ‘n’ roll era, by 1971 he was reduced to haring around the country from one small nightclub to another. It was four in the morning, Dave and Ansell Collins’s ‘Double Barrel’ was number one, and he was doing 90 mph when he crashed and died on a single-lane bridge at Glangrwyney, Wales. He was forty-one.

=10 Vera Lynn, ‘Auf Wiederseh’n’ (Decca F 9927)

Vera’s first hit of the year had been a much more rousing effort than the forlorn ‘Forget Me Not’. By November it was dropping off the chart, but ‘Auf Wiederseh’n’ would turn out to be the biggest seller of 1952. It was also a number-one single in America; Vera was the first British act to achieve this feat. The song’s romantic take on World War Two was shameless – it even references ‘We’ll Meet Again’ – but it was mostly notable for its singalong qualities. In case you missed the point of it, there was a massed choir of soldiers almost drowning out the lead vocal. Join in and sing. Follow the leader.

It had a reactionary streak that would remain strong in modern pop. The friction between conservatism on one hand (the deliberately dumb) and art school on the other (pop with pretensions of greatness) caused a crucial tension that would fire glam’s internal battles, would set up Texan garage punk’s blurring aggression as a counterpoint to psychedelia’s cosmic quest, and would play the basic, joyous noise of UK rave off against the perceived ‘intelligence’ of drum and bass.

What would fans of ‘Auf Wiederseh’n’ have heard in its simple chant in 1952? They would have considered it a solid song, one you could directly relate to, with
real history behind it. In America, country music served a similar purpose; later, metal would become a similarly solid, conservative pop strand. You weren’t taking a risk with this music; you weren’t backing anything that could be here and gone in a flash, or something that could overly embarrass you if a friend pulled it off your shelf two years later. There was no fear of looking silly among your peers if you supported it.

At the same time, ‘Auf Wiederseh’n’ sounds older than anything else on the first chart. This was the sound of a closing-time pub singalong, or family get-togethers around the piano in the parlour, decades-old habits. By the early fifties people were dumping their pianos on the street – there were so many second-hand ones on the market, you couldn’t sell them – and replacing them with radios, gramophones and televisions. The fact that the NME singles chart existed at all meant that songs like ‘Auf Wiederseh’n’ were on the wane.

10 Mario Lanza, ‘Because You’re Mine’ (HMV DA 2017)

‘Because You’re Mine’ was the first-ever hit single as we know it, an actual piece of seven-inch vinyl. As a slice of light opera it shamed British pretenders like David Whitfield and Lee Lawrence, and even Al Martino – all of them sound puny alongside the lung power of bon viveur Mario Lanza.

His meteoric career was decidedly modern. Lanza was an astonishing tenor who studied with conductor Leonard Bernstein before making his stage debut aged twenty-one in 1942 – the New York Times reckoned, very early on, that he had ‘few equals among tenors of the day in terms of quality, warmth and power’. After serving in the war, his career took off and by 1947 his voice was reducing people to tears at the Hollywood Bowl. Louis Mayer was in the crowd, and convinced Lanza that he could be a film star. He was right: in 1950 Lanza starred in The Toast of New Orleans, singing ‘Be My Love’, which became a million-seller; a year later he was the only possible candidate for the lead in The Great Caruso, which played fast and loose with Caruso’s life story and made a pop song – ‘The Loveliest Night of the Year’ – out of ‘Sobre las Olas’. Opera critics were horrified. Lanza’s love of food and drink began to bloat him. ‘Because You’re Mine’ became his last million-seller, and by the time of his death in 1959 he was both ignored by opera critics and regarded by pop fans as a has-been. The perils of getting caught up in the machinery would run through the modern pop story – Lanza’s rise and fall would find echoes in the lives of Marc Bolan and Kurt Cobain.
As modern pop grew up, it would subtly attempt to reintroduce elements that had been cast aside in rock ‘n’ roll’s birthing. If we can say that the Shadows were subtly bringing the influence of Mantovani back into the chart, then it’s safe to say Elvis was channelling Mario Lanza on ‘It’s Now or Never’ (UK and US no. 1 ’60) and, most obviously, at the climax of ‘Surrender’ (UK and US no. 1 ’61). Elvis was trying to recapture the intangible magic of the music he had grown up with; in turn, the sixties beat era would be a twenty-something’s recap of their Elvis moment, reigniting the thrill they had felt when they first heard ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ as young teenagers. T. Rextasy would reference Beatlemania – and the process continued. This was one of modern pop’s magical properties: by participating, you could be more than just a consumer – you were helping to create pop history. There came a point where you realised you were a scholar with access to a personal, hand-built library rather than a rotten pupil who had been bunking off school to buy seven-inch singles.

11 Max Bygraves, ‘Cowpuncher’s Cantata’ (HMV B 10250)

Along with his Mario Lanza albums, Elvis Presley's record collection included the soundtrack to The Pajama Game, televangelist Jack Van Impe’s Marked for Death: Can America Survive? and Max Bygraves’s Singalongachristmas. This was more likely to be because Elvis used to buy every new Christmas album each year than for any strong feelings he had for the music of Max Bygraves. ‘Cowpuncher’s Cantata’ was a medley of recent country-flavoured songs which, while its humour was fairly lame, at least signified the nascent presence of what the Daily Mirror called ‘commercial folk music’ in Britain.

By 1955 a noticeable breeze would be catching Britain’s weather vane. There was a strong thread of country music, something approximating Americana, nudging to the fore in the British singles charts. Slim Whitman, a yodeller who meant little outside of specialist markets in the US, scored the year’s biggest hit, ‘Rose Marie’ – eleven weeks at number one – which was lyrically as racked as Frankie Laine and sonically quite windswept: ‘Of all the queens who ever lived, I’d choose you to rule me, my Rose Marie.’ It sounded like it was recorded in a ghost town, with clanking pianola and tumbleweed vocal.

Tennessee Ernie Ford’s ‘Sixteen Tons’ followed ‘Rose Marie’ to number one a few months later, a deeply atmospheric piece which featured little more than Ford’s earth-shaking baritone, his menacing finger-clicking and some sparse, strange woodwind accompaniment: ‘I was born one morning, it was drizzling
rain,’ he sang, his voicesliding into subsonics on the last word. Jimmy Young’s ‘The Man from Laramie’, another 1955 number one, was similarly minimal, albeit Omo-washed and starched, a cowboy song all the way from the barren prairies of Wiltshire. Yet it indicated a desire for something different, something a little more gritty than ‘Blue Tango’ or ‘Feet Up’. The British public may not have known what it wanted, but it was just about to get it.

12 Johnnie Ray, ‘Walking My Baby Back Home’ (Columbia DB 3060)

Aside from Frankie Laine and Slim Whitman, two other pre-rock American figures suggested pop’s possible futures. Roy Hamilton was a little more subtle than Frankie Laine; he was also one of the few black singers outside of jazz to impact on pre-rock. He never bothered the British charts but, more than any of his contemporaries, his US hits laid some kind of blueprint for the next two decades. Hamilton had studied commercial art, had operatic and classical voice training, then became a heavyweight Golden Gloves boxer, a combination that lent him a sonorous authority, with just a hint of real danger.

His material was strong red meat: he hit the R&B Top 10 with ‘Ebb Tide’, ‘Hurt’, ‘If I Loved You’ and ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ (all 1954), before reaching number six in the pop chart with ‘Unchained Melody’ (1955). No one else has sung ‘I’ve hungered for your touch’ as affectingly. Roy Hamilton brought gospel into pop, and dug the earliestfoundations for soul.

Almost uniquely, he could appear on the US pop charts while still playing at the Apollo in Harlem; he’d have become a major star but he caught tuberculosis in ’56 and was forced into semi-retirement. Emotive, rocking hits came intermittently to show what might have been (‘Don’t Let Go’, no. 13 ’58; ‘You Can Have Her’, no. 12 ’61), but he never fully recovered. In 1969 he attempted another comeback, recording ‘Dark End of the Street’ in Memphis, while Elvis Presley – cutting ‘Suspicious Minds’ in the adjoining studio – watched on with due respect. Hamilton died of a stroke just a few weeks later.

Arguably the most significant modern pop forebear was Johnnie Ray, who was raised in rural Oregon, where an accident at a Boy Scout jamboree had left him deaf in his right ear. Unlike pretty much all his contemporaries, he was inspired by black singers like Roy Hamilton, LaVern Baker and Ivory Joe Hunter. At the turn of the fifties, in Detroit’s Flame Showbar, Ray mixed up pre-rock and R&B and created a sensation.
Several things marked Ray out as something quite new. For a start he cut a less than manly figure, more emaciated even than the forties Sinatra, and looked in urgent need of a nap as well as a square meal. He also looked uncomfortable on stage, clenching his fists and wiping his sweaty palms on his suit trousers, and – and this was a first – women unashamedly wanted to mother him and smother him. Then there was his hearing aid. Using these props he’d wind himself up with windmill arm movements until, climactically, he broke out in tears. ‘I don’t have a voice,’ he explained to the Daily Mirror, ‘I got a style.’ Johnnie Ray was not easy listening, and he wasn’t about to win any ideal husband poll.

The perception of Ray was also complicated because he had hits on the R&B chart, which was almost unknown for a white singer in the early fifties. He would mess about with black recordings like the Drifters’ ‘Such a Night’, adding his own oohs, mmms and slow intakes of breath to up the ante. ‘When we kissed ... I had to fall in love’; if Chuck Jones’s leering wolf was a record, this would be it. ‘Such a Night’ went all the way to number one in the UK (it only made nineteen in the US), between the spectacularly chaste pairing of Doris Day and David Whitfield; that alone goes some way to explaining Ray’s pre-rock impact.

As a record of how audiences – Britain’s first teen screamers – reacted to Ray’s stage act, there was the 1954 Live at the London Palladium album. They sighed and gasped as if they were watching a saucy circus act. They screamed for ‘Such a Night’, which he reprised, and reprised again. And he did this until you can hear girls shout ‘Johnnie!!’, at which point modern pop came alive.

A mid-fifties British TV documentary called Fan Fever interviewed Dickie Valentine, Alma Cogan and Dennis Lotis, focusing on the new fad for screaming at stars on stage. Lotis, smoking a pipe, recalled with no small displeasure how one inflamed girl managed to grab and remove one of his shoes. The Johnnie Ray Fan Club of Great Britain were interviewed – all of them were girls. Some were content to collect Ray’s records; others knitted their own jumpers emblazoned with their idol’s name. One had a piece of clothing, a sacred shred ripped from his body. Another particularly tough-looking girl had primitively carved Ray’s name on her arm – you hoped for her sake it wasn’t a real tattoo. A studio panel furrowed its brow and passed judgement. A grizzled American psychiatrist gave his opinion. They agreed unanimously – it was a passing craze.

1 It was the idea of the NME’s Percy Dickins, who compiled it himself by obtainingsales figures from twenty record shops around the country. Initially, the chart was a Top 12, expanding to a Top 20 in 1955.
2 *Opportunity Knocks* started as a radio show in 1949, moved to ITV in 1956 and stayed on the air until 1978. Listeners and viewers phoned in to vote for their favourite performer, who could be a comedian, a magician or a singing dog – the format survives as *Britain’s Got Talent*. The show was referenced by George Harrison on the BBC TV show *Blackpool Night Out*, as the Beatles premiered ‘Yesterday’: ‘For Paul McCartney of Liverpool, opportunity knocks!’

3 Mantovani’s atmospheric arrangement on ‘Cara Mia’, I should add, is something else. Genuinely celestial. If anyone with a degree of subtlety was singing, it would be quite a record.

4 Laine was a rock-era prototype – the bruised, sensitive, big man. His movie-screenmannerisms crop up periodically, notably on Roy Orbison’s ‘Running Scared’ (US no. 1, UK no. 9 ’60), P. J. Proby’s ‘I Can’t Make It Alone’ (UK no. 37 ’66) and Chris Isaak’s ‘Wicked Game’ (US no. 6, UK no. 10 ’90).

5 Eddie Fisher’s vocal cover version was an American number one in 1954. It was both more cloying than Calvert’s recording and comically damning with faint praise: ‘Oh my papa, so funny ... in his way.’

6 Alma Cogan died of cancer in 1965, by which time she had become London’s most famous party hostess, carousing with Sammy Davis Jr and the Beatles alike. When Gordon Burn wrote a novel about Britain in the fifties and sixties, he called it *Alma Cogan*, fictionalising her life and imagining she was still alive, looking back at her career.

7 Ruby Murray could’ve been bigger than the Beatles ... wait a minute, she was! No other act in the vinyl era managed to have as many singles simultaneously in the Top 20.

8 America had already encountered teen screams as far back as October 12th 1944, when thirty-five thousand girls, many wearing bobby sox and bow ties, caused a near riot outside the Paramount in New York because they couldn’t get in to see Frank Sinatra. It became known as the Columbus Day Riot. Sinatra was already twenty-nine; to many of his fans he would have seemed like a father figure, even if he did make them feel all churned up inside. But he was a phenomenon, and the bobby soxers who swooned for him also wet themselves and threw their bras at him. Sinatra was a pointer to the future for youth culture, a harbinger, though the Columbus Day Riot was something of an anomaly. While it was commonplace for Hollywood stars to get mauled and screamed at, no pop star would receive remotely similar treatment until Eddie Fisher (much more gently) at the turn of the fifties. Sinatra’s career was in decline by this point; after
attempting suicide, he starred in From Here to Eternity in ’53, then worked with Nelson Riddle on ‘Young at Heart’ in ’54, and successfully recast himself as a purely adult artist just as rock ‘n’ roll hit the mainstream. His fans grew up with him.

2

FLIP, FLOP AND FLY: BILL HALEY AND JUMP BLUES

One summer night in 1954 a train travelling from Southend-on-Sea to London came to a sudden halt when someone pulled the emergency cord. But there was no emergency. No one was ill, there was no real reason for it. After a moment’s ominous silence came the sound of smashing glass as lightbulbs got busted, plunging carriages into darkness. When the trashed train pulled into Barking, police arrested a bunch of youths in Edwardian suits.

Teddy boys and Teddy girls pre-date rock ‘n’ roll. Theirs was the first public display of fidgeting, the first tangible proof that Britain’s younger generation was restless and wanted meatier entertainment than the gruel they were being offered. Their parents had been too caught up in staying alive; they’d had enough excitement.

The first generation of Teds had their own dances – the creep, the stroll – and danced to the more rhythmically forceful big bands, the ones with a touch of burlesque, like the Kirchins and Ken Mackintosh. Music was part of their identity, as were the coffee bars that had sprung up like bright formica flowers on most high streets since the Festival of Britain. They had no adult supervision beyond the owners, who knew they could get a brick through their window if they interfered with this teenage business. Jukeboxes sat in the corner, restlessly waiting for the new rhythm.
In 1955 Bill Haley and his Comets released ‘Rock around the Clock’, and it was the sound the Teds had been waiting for. It was the first record to have – all in one place – a lyric about all-night partying, a thrilling guitar solo and a rock-solid beat, with its drums way up in the mix. What’s more, its success was on an international scale, and this is why it crossed a generational threshold, ushering in the rock ‘n’ roll era.

The beauty of rock ‘n’ roll was not just its newness but its gleeful awareness of its newness, wiping out the repression of the post-war decade. It wasn’t as if the old guard didn’t put up a fight, but once the door was opened, once ‘Rock around the Clock’ hit number one in Britain and America in 1955, the heart of pop beat differently. At least fifty per cent of the genre’s biggest hits could conceivably be filed under novelty: Buddy Holly’s hiccup, Little Richard’s shrieks, Elvis’s pelvic thrusts, gimmicks all over, go ape crazy – everything was now permissible as long as it created the most stupidly, gloriously distorted noise.

Whether the sounds were created by genuine madmen or were manufactured mayhem was irrelevant; the rock ‘n’ roll aesthetic was anti-boredom. Suddenly, noise and overexcitement became values rather than marks of low quality. It was here and gone in a flash – hardly more than two years between initial explosion and self-parody. When later generations coined the term ‘rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle’ for leather-jacket-wearing, TV-smashing, Jack Daniels-swilling, smashed-out oblivion, they did the innovators a bad disservice: first-wave rock ‘n’ roll was fast-moving, fun, disposable and defiantly youthful, no time for cliché. There is more rock ‘n’ roll in the three minutes of passionatedishevelment in Barbara Pitman’s ‘I Need a Man’ than the combined catalogues of Aerosmith and Mötley Crüe.

The codes that have riddled modern pop since the rock ‘n’ roll explosion – rock versus pop, underground versus Top 40 – were some way off in the mid-fifties. Almost nobody aside from radio DJs was collecting records or filling in catalogue numbers. Ideologues weren’t yet squabbling over Ricky Nelson or Buddy Holly or Johnny Burnette’s place in the rock pantheon because nobody was talking about a rock pantheon.

In the twenty-first century Bill Haley is rarely included in any critic’s list of prime movers, which is sad and a little ridiculous. Whichever way you slice it, he was at the front of the queue. Haley invented rock ‘n’ roll. No one had blended country and R&B before Haley wrote and recorded ‘Rock the Joint’;¹ no one hit the Billboard Top 20 with something that could be safely labelled rock ‘n’ roll
before ‘Crazy Man Crazy’; and no one scored a rocking number one before ‘Rock around the Clock’ turned the music world upside down.

* * *

Teds had been searching for their own musical identity, and it was clear that minor variations on the big-band music their parents had danced to were unsatisfactory. Equally clearly, the opening sequence of 1955 movie *Blackboard Jungle* was just what they needed: juvenile delinquents take over a school and symbolically smash a teacher’s collection of jazz 78s into little pieces, to the soundtrack of ‘Rock around the Clock’.

In America, a potential musical revolution had been flagged as far back as 1951, when Leo Fender sold his first electric bass guitar, and early adopters – like Shifty Henry of Louis Jordan’s Tympany Five and the Lionel Hampton band’s Roy Johnson – began to change the dynamics of R&B and jazz. But in 1955 Britain, the metallic backbeat of ‘Rock around the Clock’, the walking bassline and the perceptible change in volume would have seemed to have come from nowhere, a total shock to the system; it unleashed a whirlwind of media attention as cinema seats were slashed by Teds across Britain.

The film’s progressive and controversial take on racial integration was enough to get *Blackboard Jungle* widely banned in the States, and the Eisenhower administration kept it from being shown at the Venice Film Festival. ‘Rock around the Clock’ and *Blackboard Jungle*’s two-pronged assault effectively compacted white teenage self-assertion and black political justice; on one side an adolescent matter, on the other very much not. This coming together, symbolised in Haley’s single, was a very big deal – for the times and for modern pop. It transformed a raucous hit record and a pop moment into something teenagers of the fifties could look back on later with more than just nostalgia, something all young people could take retrospective pride in. By the first week of July 1955 government edicts counted for nothing – ‘Rock around the Clock’ was America’s number-one single.

The main source material for ‘Rock around the Clock’ was jump blues, which had been around since the mid-forties. Jump blues had utilised the big-band swing sound that had dominated the thirties and forties, stripped back the number of musicians, placed the saxophone at the front of the brass section, replaced croons with harsher blues vocals and shifted the guitar to the rhythm section. With all hands to the rhythm pump, the music literally began to jump. The lyrics were frequently filthy and a whole lot of fun.
Arkansas-born Louis Jordan was the king of jump blues. He had been the one star name who – if you wanted a severely edited pop history – provided a smooth transition between the swing and rock ‘n’ roll eras. With the Tympany Five, he had laced his scaled-down swing sound with a blue comedian’s shtick and ribald titles (‘You Run Your Mouth and I’ll Run My Business’, ‘I Like ‘Em Fat Like That’, ‘That Chick’s Too Young to Fry’). Fast-talking tales of gals in fox furs and zoot-suited brothers were propelled by boogie-woogie piano and saucy sax solos. A 1941 engagement at Chicago’s Capitol Lounge, supporting the Mills Brothers, had proved to be his breakthrough; Jordan’s records were then issued in Decca’s Sepia series (which was meant to appeal to both black and white audiences): ‘What’s the Use of Gettin’ Sober (When You’re Gonna Get Drunk Again)’ was his first number one on the race chart in ’42; ‘Is You Is or Is You Ain’t Ma Baby’ was a pop number one, and a million-seller, in ’44. In Jordan’s wake came Roy Brown (‘Good Rocking Tonight’), Big Joe Turner (‘Shake, Rattle and Roll’), Wynonie Harris (‘Bloodshot Eyes’), Stick McGhee (‘Drinkin’ Wine Spo-Dee-o-Dee’) – stepping it up, amplifying and emphasising the beat until someone at Billboard magazine decided it wasn’t plain blues any more, it was rhythm and blues, and the moniker stuck: the ‘race’ chart was renamed the R&B chart in 1947.

A DJ in Cleveland called Alan Freed had been using another term, ‘rock ‘n’ roll’, since he started his Moondog radio show in 1951: ‘OK, kids, let’s rock and roll with the rhythm and blues!’ he’d shout, beating out the time on a phone book. Freed’s hold over Cleveland youth became clear when he put on the Moondog Coronation Ball in March 1952: more than twenty thousand turned up for a bill that included R&B vocal acts the Dominoes, featuring the dynamic tenor of Clyde McPhatter, and the Orioles, along with the lesser known Tiny Grimes, Rockin’ Highlanders, Danny Cobb and Varetta Dillard. In the event, only Paul ‘Hucklebuck’ Williams got to play before the police broke it up, as kids smashed their way into the basketball stadium. One act or none, it qualifies as the first-ever rock concert. The audience, for the record, was almost entirely black.

Soon enough, by concentrating on ballads with a beat, hollering over them on the radio and almost willing the music to sound younger, Freed’s Moondog show began to stretch out into the suburbs of the north-east – the white neighbourhoods. Two years later he moved to New York, to radio station WINS, and there he introduced millions of white teens to the new music. The New York Times reckoned he ‘jumped into radio like a stripper into Swan Lake’. 
Bill Haley was a pro musician with a keen ear. He had started recording back in the mid-forties as the Rambling Yodeller and was already thirty by the time ‘Rock around the Clock’ hit number one and there was no turning back. In 1952, around the time the *Moondog* show was keeping Cleveland’s cops occupied, he began to loosen his cowboy image, changed his band’s name from the Saddlemen to the Comets, and incorporated R&B into their set. First off, they covered Jackie Brenston’s ‘Rocket 88’ – Haley added an intro with a car starting up because he understood pop well, and reasoned that no song couldn’t be improved by the sound of a car revving out of your radio. It became a hit in the north-eastern states.\(^7\)

Haley later told *Melody Maker* that ‘the real turning point for me came with a record called “Icy Heart”. This song broke into the country charts, and I was on the road to Nashville promoting that song and with an introduction to get me onto the Grand Ole Opry. Then suddenly I had a call [from his manager]. Somebody had started to play the other side, which was a fast boogie thing, “Rock the Joint”, and it was selling to blacks and to white teenagers. So he said, get back here, take off the cowboy hat and those boots and get yourself a tuxedo. You’re going into the northern club circuit. It happened just like that, literally.’

On a roll, Haley picked up the title ‘Crazy Man Crazy’ from teenage jive speak and crossed over from huckster showman to the big time, writing himself a US number-twelve hit in 1953; in some cities it was a number one, and it soon sold one hundred thousand copies. ‘We were booked into jazz clubs often, because there was no precedent for us. There was no rock ‘n’ roll then. So, with a number-one hit on the chart in Chicago in 1953, we found ourselves booked on a double bill with Dizzy Gillespie. The club owner hated us and he threw us out on the street.’\(^8\)

He may have been travelling without a guide, a true innovator, but Haley was never a pin-up and his voice was reedy, short on sustain, almost asthmatic. He was partially blind and tried to cover his bad eye with a plastered-down kiss curl. The Comets were a perfectly good, driving little C&W dance band that upped the ante by acting like a circus menagerie on stage – bassist Marshall Lyttle defied physics by twirling his double bass above his head. This way, you didn’t notice the receding hairlines or the crow’s feet. But what took them out of the backwoods and into history was their unintentional adherence to one of pop’s primary unwritten laws – they were in the right place at the right time. Bill Haley did it all when it really mattered.
A cover of Big Joe Turner’s ‘Shake, Rattle and Roll’ in 1954 took him into the US Top 10 and, incredibly, to number four in the UK. Hearing it alongside the three records above it in the British charts – Dickie Valentine’s brilliantined ‘Finger of Suspicion’, pub pianist Winifred Atwell’s ‘Let’s Have Another Party’, the Chordettes’ antique nursery rhyme ‘Mr Sandman’ – ‘Shake, Rattle and Roll’ must have sounded like a bomb had gone off at the school gates.9

The clincher for Haley’s career came when his manager Dave Myers nailed ‘Rock around the Clock’ – a song he’d co-written that had been on the B-side of ‘Thirteen Women’ in ’54 – to Blackboard Jungle’s opening credits. It duly became, eighteen months after it was recorded, the first international teen anthem.

It wasn’t that rock, or even rock ’n’ roll, hadn’t been mentioned in lyrics before ‘Rock around the Clock’: possibly first out of the blocks was Wild Bill Moore’s ‘We’re Gonna Rock, We’re Gonna Roll’ (1947); Gunter Lee Carr’s ‘We’re Gonna Rock’ (1950) was more basic and brutal, pounded out on a loosely tuned piano. While both implied high jinks, neither was a clarion call.

The link between the old and new worlds was producer Milt Gabler, who had helped Louis Jordan’s move from the race chart to the mainstream pop chart, producing and co-writing his million-selling ‘Choo Choo Ch’Boogie’ in 1946. Gabler rushed the arrangement of ‘Rock around the Clock’, as it was only a B-side, to spend more time on the top side, ‘Thirteen Women’. This left a clattering, drum-heavy mix. It sounded like jump blues, only with someone dismantling scaffolding in the studio.

There are a few intros in the pop canon that can give you an adrenalin shot within a second – literally – of them starting up, intros that are guaranteed to cause a sharp intake of breath and a dash to the dancefloor. The hard, silver chord that opens ‘A Hard Day’s Night’ is one; there’s also the oddly dolorous but huge sound that launches T. Rex’s ‘Metal Guru’, the barely controlled bagpipe glee of the Crystals’ ‘Da Doo Ron Ron’, the cascade of Pepsi bubbles on Cyndi Lauper’s ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’. Right at the beginning there was the sharp double snare hit, followed by ‘One two three o’clock, four o’clock rock …’

The two solos in ‘Rock around the Clock’ paint a remarkable contrast. The first, an unfeasibly fast-picked guitar line, is a total blast, like a double-speed Tom and Jerry party piece – not violent but exciting enough to make you laugh out loud. The second solo, a unison brass line, was straight out of Glenn Miller, the forties biplane sound of ‘In the Mood’ with the merest sprinkling of modernity.
Ten years of county fairs and working as a local DJ, working like a dog, had sharpened Haley’s sensibilities; no question, he’d hit on an instantly identifiable sound, and he milked it. In 1957 he had seven more UK hits, five of them Top 10, which all adhered to the same tempo, the same greased-down backbeat: ‘See You Later, Alligator’, ‘Rock-a-Beatin’ Boogie’, ‘The Saints Rock ‘n’ Roll’, ‘Rockin’ through the Rye’, ‘Rip It Up’. There was even a film called Rock around the Clock. Having played his hand so well, the firestarter decided to tour Britain in early ’57. Moondog’s coronation may have brought twenty thousand out to party and break free from ballad hell in Cleveland, but Bill Haley’s first tour of Britain was like the second coming. Thousands met him and the Comets, the saviours of modern youth, when they docked at Southampton. They were expecting a sun god, they wanted to anoint the man who had delivered us from Vera Lynn. Instead, they got pop’s own Wizard of Oz. Bill Haley was no deity, he was an uncle.

Even this may not have been too tragic. But he wasn’t your cool Uncle Bill, the one who’d play you his stash of Wynonie Harris 78s and give you a sneaky can of beer when your mum wasn’t about – the one who made you feel like part of a secret society, a cut above the meatheads at school. No, this was the Uncle Bill who was a bit too loud and sweaty at a wedding party, dark rings under his sleeves, making bitter, off-colour jokes about his ex-wife.

Having obeyed one of modern pop’s primary rules with his sense of timing, Bill Haley messed up on another: keep the mystery caged. The kids had fun at his shows, made the most of it, but the sense of anti-climax was palpable. Haley had one more hit after his UK tour, then disappeared from the charts.

By 1967, when he toured again, the Comets were a museum piece. ‘We’re going through the same period that Sinatra and Armstrong went through,’ he told the NME. ‘You’re up, you’re down, and if you were good in the first place, you make it back. We’ll be there.’ The Vegas engagements never came; instead he was seen almost as a novelty figure, Fatty Arbuckle with a guitar, consigned to cabaret until his lonely death in 1981. His heyday was brief but, truthfully, without Bill Haley the rest of this book could not have been written.

1 Though Haley claimed the writing credit, it was based on Jimmy Preston and the Prestonians’ 1949 boogie-woogie record of the same title. Country had been influenced by black musicians for decades, and there was a strain known as ‘country boogie’ in the late forties: the Delmore Brothers’ ‘Hillbilly Boogie’ (1945), Jack Guthrie’s ‘Oakie Boogie’ (1947), Arthur ‘Guitar’ Smith’s ‘Guitar Boogie’ (1948), Tennessee Ernie Ford’s ‘Shotgun Boogie’ (1950). The only other strong claim to the first cohesive R&B/country blend is Hardrock Gunter’s ‘Birmingham
Bounce’ (1950), a country-boogie single that mentioned rockin’ – and was in turn derived from black ragtime pianist Charles ‘Cow Cow’ Davenport’s 1929 single ‘Mama Don’t Allow No Easy Riders Here’ – though it still sounds like a hillbilly record. Haley’s ‘Rock the Joint’ was the first to effectively rip an R&B single and make it feel comfortable in the hands of a country band.

2 Racism in the music industry was a given before rock ‘n’ roll. When RCA came to release DeFord Bailey’s version of ‘John Henry’ in 1928, they had a problem – it was a folk instrumental played on the harmonica, but Bailey was black. It ended up being released separately in both RCA’s race and hillbilly series. Never the twain would meet, apparently. Hindsight’s a fine thing but it’s hard to understand how RCA in Britain released nine EPs of vintage blues under the banner of the RCA Victor Race series in 1965 – that’s after the Rolling Stones’ cover of Willie Dixon’s ‘Little Red Rooster’ had been number one, Sonny Boy Williamson and John Lee Hooker had toured Britain, playing to largely white crowds, and Millie’s ‘My Boy Lollipop’ had been the UK’s first major ska hit.

3 Boogie-woogie had been a major step up for blues in the late thirties, more urban, less country, reflecting the migration of black Southern workers to cities like Chicago. The rolling, rhythmic piano that pushed it along was as basic and direct as the name, which, like rock ‘n’ roll, was a euphemism for sex.

4 It was Jerry Wexler of Billboard magazine who coined it as a marketing term in 1948, as ‘race music’ had become an embarrassing name even to the white music industry. Louis Jordan has the cosmic claim of eighteen R&B chart number ones, a figure only bettered by Aretha Franklin and Stevie Wonder.

5 As the rise of television forced non-network radio stations to go for a more distinctive, specialised sound in order to keep their audience, it led to the rise of other hip DJs around the country in 1953 and ’54 who were white but happy to play black music to a mixed audience: Dewey Phillips (Memphis), Art Laboe (Los Angeles), Bob ‘Wolfman Jack’ Smith (Shreveport).

6 No one will counter Freed’s claim to coining the term ‘rock ‘n’ roll’; claims on the first rock ‘n’ roll single, though, are almost entirely subjective. Revisionists have given a big shout for Jackie Brenston’s ‘Rocket 88’, a 1951 Sun Studios recording that featured a sax solo, a boogie-woogie piano intro later pinched note-for-note on Little Richard’s ‘Good Golly Miss Molly’, distorted electric guitar, a leering vocal and a suitably teenage lyric (cars, no more or less). It was a great record, and topped the rhythm and blues chart for five weeks.

The ingredients were pretty much ready for the chef, then, but Brenston’s ‘Rocket 88’ was all murk, rich with the fug of a speakeasy. It hardly sounded young at all.
It was proto-rock ‘n’ roll, but it wasn’t any more rock ‘n’ roll than the Ames Brothers’ irresistible, nonsensical, beat-backed, guitar-driven ‘Rag Mop’, a US number one in 1950.

7 Different regions of the US had local charts, which could be based on record sales but were more often compiled by radio stations, combining airplay and sales. The vastness of America meant that records could be purely regional phenomena. Tommy James and the Shondells’ ‘Hanky Panky’, for instance, was picked up by a Pittsburgh DJ in 1966 three years after it was recorded, and the record was re-pressed locally, becoming a Pittsburgh number one before it eventually broke nationally. Los Angeles band the Merry-Go-Round had two LA number ones in 1967 but neither even reached the national Top 20.

8 This tale reveals the widening gap between a music for white teenagers and club-based jazz – still very much a black, adult music. As the music the Comets were playing had no obvious name, Haley toyed with idea of calling it ‘crazy’ music. Luckily Alan Freed came up with a rather better name for it soon after.

9 It is received wisdom that Haley’s version is bowdlerised, deleting the black slang from Turner’s take, making it acceptable to picket-fence America and privet-hedge Britain. Yes, he lost ‘I can look at you ’til you ain’t no child no more’, which probably sounded faintly uncomfortable then and sounds a whole lot worse now. More importantly, Haley kept in ‘I’m like a one-eyed cat peeping in a seafood store’, which remains the most sexually graphic and grubby line on a Top 5 single to this day.

10 Moore later played the joyous sax break on Marvin Gaye’s ‘Mercy Mercy Me’.
In the early seventies Elvis Presley’s record label, RCA, released an album of unreleased outtakes called *A Legendary Performer*: when it outsold his new album of maudlin country ballads, the singer must have felt he had begun to lose the battle with his own myth. Trapped inside Graceland, the Memphis mansion
that was half home, half prison, the humble country boy who had done more than anyone to invent teen culture grew overweight and suffered severe depression; to the outside world, though, he was still the ultimate superstar, the invincible King of Rock ‘n’ Roll. Eighteen months before he died, Elvis told his producer Felton Jarvis, ‘I’m so tired of being Elvis Presley.’

No one has had the pop-culture impact of Elvis Presley. Adults didn’t get him at all. He invented himself, a true modernist, drawing on the best of everything that surrounded him and making it new. He rose faster, fell further, had the most glorious comeback, and died young, alone in his palace. Elvis Presley was a deity and a comic monstrosity. He was tender, thuggish, generous, narcissistic, charming, sensitive, self-destructive and paranoid. Sam Phillips, the producer at Sun Records who first recorded the boy wonder in 1954, remembered Elvis, even at the outset, as having ‘the greatest inferiority complex of any person, black or white, that I had worked with. He was a total loner. He kind of felt locked out.’ His music was also sweet, brutal, lonely, ecstatic. And for this Elvis has been loved more fiercely than any pop star since.

Some argue that rock ‘n’ roll would have happened without Elvis, and they may be right, but that doesn’t mean it would have taken over, not at all. Bill Haley had arrived at his sound by trial and error, mixing graft, a keen ear for what the customer wanted and a willingness to dabble in R&B’s black arts. It took him ten years to find the right sound. Elvis Presley walked into Sun Studios, Memphis, one day in summer 1954, and did it in a heartbeat.