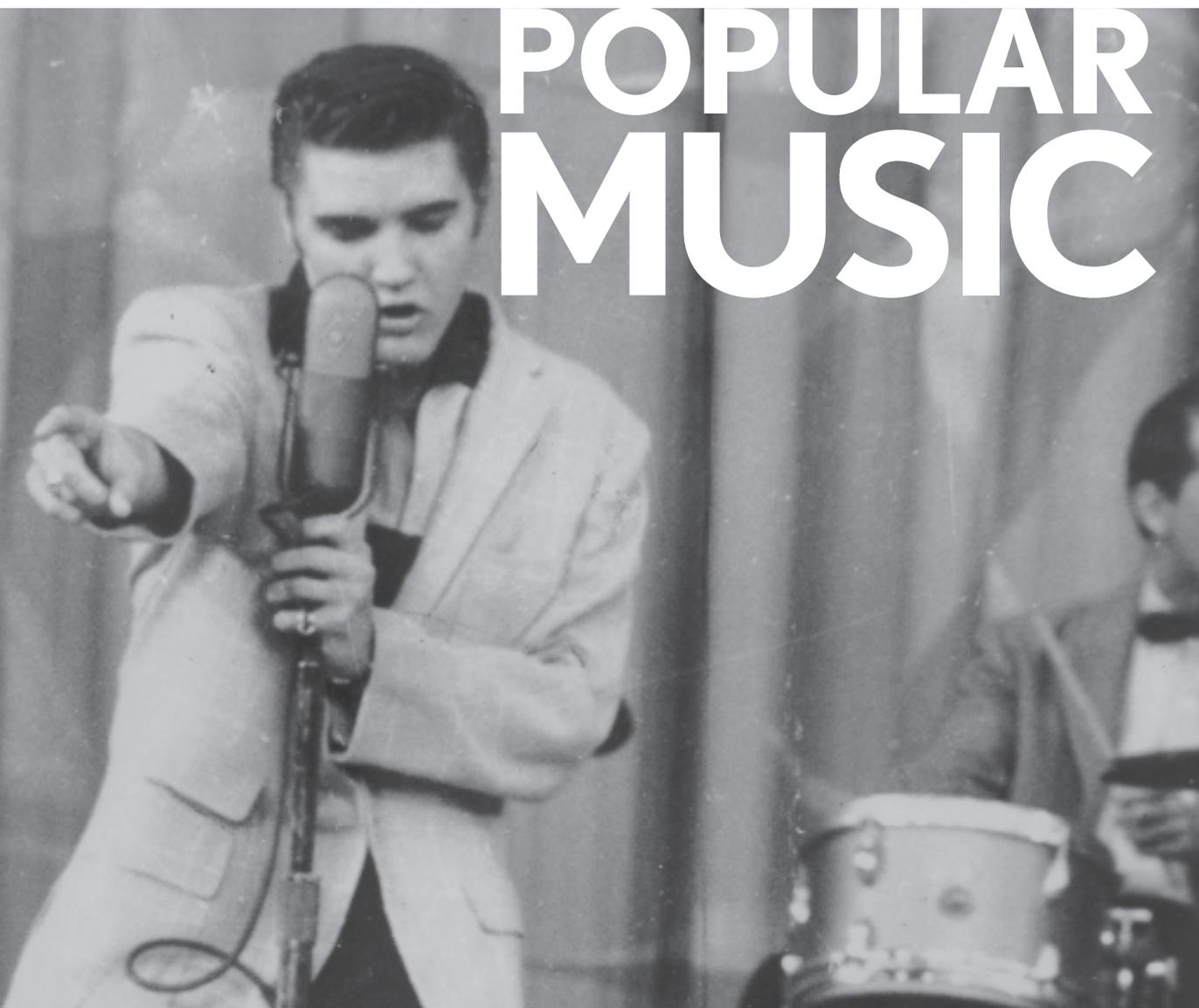

**American Popular
Music:
The Rock Years**

*Larry Starr
Christopher Waterman*

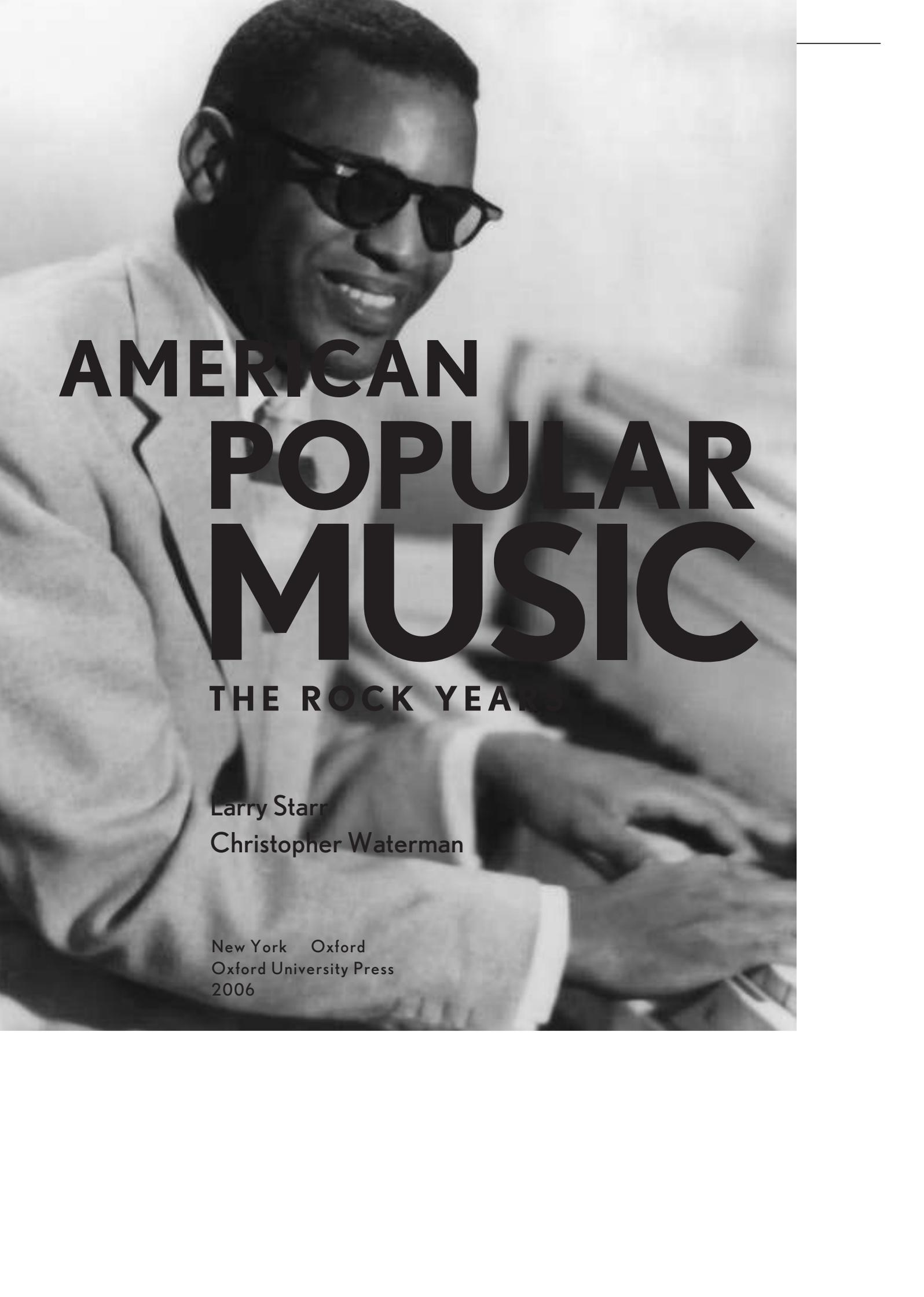
Oxford University Press

AMERICAN

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THE ROCK YEARS

Larry Starr
Christopher Waterman

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PREFACE

In presenting this survey of the rich terrain of American popular music during the rock era, we hope to have created a book capable of serving a number of purposes. It may be used as a text for introductory college-level courses, obviously, as it assumes a mature and literate reader but not one who necessarily has any specific background in music or in this particular area of musical study. These same assumptions will also make this book useful to the general reader who wishes a broad-based introduction to our subject. In addition, this volume will serve the interests of specialists—musicians, graduate students, teachers, and scholars—who need a one-volume overview, or review, of the topic. We have kept this wide potential audience constantly in mind as we strove to keep our book accessible and inviting, while always reflecting our own deep involvement in the music and in contemporary scholarly issues surrounding it.

American Popular Music: The Rock Years is an abridged version of our comprehensive book *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MTV*. We have made every effort to retain the inclusive approach of the parent volume while producing a work of manageable size that can stand alone successfully as an internally consistent whole. Nevertheless, we must stress that this book inevitably tells just a portion of a huge and impressive story, and we direct those readers wishing to gain a thorough insight into the remarkable history of American popular music to our original, unabridged text.

What distinguishes our book from others in its rapidly growing field is that it combines two perspectives not often found in the same place: the study of cultural and social history on the one hand, and the analytical study of musical style on the other. Lest this sound disconcertingly heavy, let us assure our readers at the outset that we have brought to the treatment of our subject years of experience in teaching courses for a general student population and in lecturing on musical subjects to general audiences. This experience has taught us that it is neither necessary nor desirable to talk down, write down, or think down to such groups. People love music and can quickly grasp all kinds of intricacies and subtleties concerning music, so long as jargon is avoided and explanations kept clear and unpretentious. We love American popular music ourselves—that is why we

have written this book—and we have attempted to foreground this love for the subject in our writing, realizing that it is the most valuable common bond we share with all potential readers of our work.

We fully expect that students, teachers, and readers of all kinds will enter into a creative dialogue with the material in this book. No general overview of a complex subject can begin to satisfy everyone. And since passions run high in the field of popular music, we anticipate that our particular perspectives, and particularly our choices of artists to emphasize and of specific examples to study, may well provoke some controversy at times, whether in the classroom or simply in the mind of the reader. We have felt it better to identify clearly our own viewpoints and enthusiasms than to try to hide behind a scrim of apparent “objectivity.” The opening chapter outlines particular *themes* and *streams* that serve as recurring reference points throughout the book, so that our narrative focus and our strategy are put forward at the outset. While we feel that this text provides a sound and reliable starting point for the study and appreciation of American popular music, we claim no more than that. We hope and expect that teachers who use this book will share supplementary and contrasting perspectives on the material with their students, and that individual readers will use the bibliography as an enriching source of such perspectives as well. As white males who came to maturity in the days of rock ‘n’ roll and 1960s rock, we inevitably bring certain limitations, along with our passions, to the understanding of the broad trajectory of our subject, and it is certainly desirable for all readers to seek out other perspectives and modes of understanding as they pursue this subject further.

A brief word concerning methodology. We have sought to limit the use of specialized terms, to employ them only when clearly necessary, and to define them as they arise naturally in the course of study. The most important and frequently employed of these terms appear in **boldface** and are given extensive definitions in the glossary at the end of the book. The glossary is reserved for terms that recur throughout the book and that would not be defined adequately for our purposes in a standard college dictionary. (This means that terms like **producer**, which has a special meaning in popular music, will be found in the glossary, along with other expected terms such as **blues** and **syncopation**.) Significant terms that are relevant only to a limited section of material are *italicized* when they first occur, are defined in context, and may also be located by using the book’s index.

An analogous strategy has been used for musical analyses. Rather than being separated out, or introduced independently, the main musical discussions are integrated into the text at the points where they become relevant to the developing narrative; this approach seemed to us both logical and functional. Listening charts are used to represent and summarize, in outline form, the most important elements of recordings that are discussed in some detail in the text. The fact that we are dealing here to an overwhelming extent with *songs*—texted music—has enabled us to treat musical issues with some sophistication without having to employ actual musical notation, since lyrics may be used as points of specific orientation in the musical discussions. This keeps the focus on *listening* and opens the musical analyses to the widest possible audience of readers without compromising depth of treatment.

Boxes are used occasionally in this book to provide further insight and information on significant individuals, recordings, and topics in cases where such material—albeit useful—would interrupt the flow of narrative. Important names are underlined throughout the book.

We would like to thank our families, who put up with a great deal as our work underwent its extensive prenatal development: Leslie, Dan, Sonya, and Gregory Starr; and Glennis and Max Waterman. We extend our gratitude to Mari-beth Payne, our initial, ever-patient editor at Oxford University Press; to her gifted associates Maureen Buja and Ellen Welch; to Janet M. Beatty, executive editor at OUP; to Peter M. Labella, senior editor at OUP; to Christine D'Antonio, senior project editor at OUP; to Talia Krohn, associate editor at OUP; to Larry Hamberlin for his superb job of copyediting; and to Emily Pillars, development editor at OUP, for her essential preliminary review of the “rock years” project. We owe a substantial debt to the many anonymous readers who offered extensive and helpful comments on our work in its various stages. At the University of Washington, our valued colleague Tom Collier has been a consistent and selfless source of assistance and encouragement. The course on American popular music out of which this book grew was shaped not only by faculty members but by graduate students as well, among whom we especially wish to cite Jon Kertzer, Peter Davenport, Stuart Goosman, and Jun Akutsu. The many students who “road-tested” drafts of several chapters and offered their reactions to them also merit our sustained thanks. Graduate assistants Timothy Kinsella, Shelley Lawson, and Nathan Link at the University of Washington, and Sabrina Motley, Mark Eby, and Ann Mazzocca at UCLA gave invaluable and generous editorial assistance. We also owe a debt of gratitude to the folks at Joel Whitburn’s Record Research for their series of books containing *Billboard* chart data. We could readily go on, like those CD inserts thanking everybody from the Almighty on down, but there’s a story waiting to be told, and we’d best get on with it. If there’s anybody out there we neglected to thank, let us know, and pray for a second edition so that we can do it next time!

Larry Starr, University of Washington
Christopher Waterman, UCLA

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AMERICAN

**POPULAR
MUSIC**



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CHAPTER ONE

THEMES AND STREAMS OF AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC

Welcome to Los Angeles! You picked up a cherry red rent-a-convertible at LAX, and you're searching the satellite radio for some sounds to accompany your drive north to the dance clubs on the Sunset Strip. Maybe a retro surf groove like "Misirlou" from the film *Pulp Fiction*; or a track from NWA's classic hip-hop album *Straight outta Compton*; or some L.A. punk, early stuff like X or Black Flag. Maybe you're a romantic at heart and want to cruise with the top down, blasting out a rock ballad from the latest Hollywood or Broadway blockbuster.

Whatever your preferences, as you fiddle with the dial it soon becomes apparent that the signals beamed into your car radio from outer space present a complex constellation of musical choices: 150 channels, from "Deep Classic Alternative" to "Urban Adult" and "Underground Dance," each representing a specialized branch of musical taste, each aimed at a particular audience. There are doubtless some channels that you might try only on occasion, and a few that you'd remove permanently from your radio if you knew how. That's the way popular music is, after all: some types of music attract us, others incite us to pitch the radio out the window, and yet others don't smell bad or good—they just don't smell like anything at all.

But think for a moment. Why all these stations? Who listens to them? Why are adjectives such as "soft" and "hard" applied to music? How do radio formats such as "classic rock," "album-oriented rock," "urban contemporary," and "adult alternative" take shape? What does this dividing up of styles and audiences tell us about contemporary American culture? And who's making money from all this?

We hope that this book will help you to think creatively and critically about such questions. Our goal is to get you to listen closely to popular music and to learn something about its history and about the people and institutions that have pro-

duced it. We cover a wide range of music, starting in the years after World War II and continuing up through the 1990s. Listening to music is an important part of this study, and we hope that you will enjoy the recordings that we have chosen to highlight. But be forewarned—we cannot possibly do justice to all the music you like, or all the musicians you admire (nor can we adequately denigrate the music you hate).

In this book we use the term “popular music” broadly, to indicate music that is mass-reproduced and disseminated via the mass media; that has at various times been listened to by large numbers of Americans; and that typically draws upon a variety of preexisting musical traditions. It is our view that popular music must be seen in relation to a broader musical landscape, in which various styles, audiences, and institutions interact in complex ways. This musical map is not static—it is always in motion, always evolving.

For our purposes, the designation “rock years” refers to a half century of musical history that begins in the mid-1950s with the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll as a group of musical styles and as a marketing category. The term “rock music” has generally been applied to a stream of popular music that flows from the pioneering rock ‘n’ roll recordings of Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, and other musicians of the 1950s. Beginning in the 1960s, rock music differentiated into marketing categories such as country rock, folk rock, art rock, glam rock, southern rock, jazz rock, Latin rock, hard rock, and heavy metal, a process that continues to this day. By the mid-1970s a rebellion against mainstream corporate rock music yielded a genre called punk rock, a back-to-basics predecessor of today’s “alternative rock.” The continued importance of “rock” as an overarching category is indicated by the use of the term in contemporary radio programming, where rock music is divided into subcategories such as hard, soft, acoustic, classic, alternative, jam band/progressive, and punk/hardcore rock.

Our book also includes a wide range of musical styles that are typically not marketed under the heading of rock music. These include a variety of popular music styles grounded in the traditions and historical experiences of African Americans, including soul music and hip-hop. This is not to say that these styles of music have developed in isolation from rock music—it is hard, for example, to imagine the development of Motown or funk music without the influence of rock music. As we will see, there is often a big difference between the categories used to sell music and actual patterns of musical influence and exchange. By the same token, we will also pay attention to music typically marketed under the heading of “country” rather than rock music. Country music was one of the main roots of rock ‘n’ roll music, and most mainstream country music today has thoroughly internalized certain stylistic characteristics of rock music.

An important underlying issue here is that of race, and the division of people and the music they make and listen to into categories such as “black” and “white.” Race and ethnicity have certainly played an important role in shaping the development of popular music in the United States, from the nineteenth-century minstrel show up to the record charts and radio formats of today, which remain partially segregated by “color.” However, the history of American popular music also provides ample evidence of music’s ability to overflow and complicate the boundaries of identity and prejudice.

It is important to remember that in many cases the sorts of stylistic categories we have been discussing here are themselves partly the product of marketing strate-

gies by record companies, who in defining types of music hope to define types of fans to whom they can sell the music. Throughout this book we will find many examples of the complex relationships among musical styles, the preferences of audiences, and the efforts of the music industry to shape those preferences.

THEME ONE: LISTENING

Although this book covers a wide range of performers and styles, it is unified by several themes. First and foremost, we hope to encourage you to listen critically to a wide variety of rock music and its offshoots. The word “critical” doesn’t imply adopting a negative attitude. Rather, critical listening is listening that consciously seeks out meaning in music, drawing on some knowledge of how music is put together, its cultural significance, and its historical development.

Even if you don’t think of yourself as a musician, and don’t have much—or any—experience at reading musical notation, it is likely that you know much more about music than you think. You know when a chord sounds “wrong,” a note “out of tune,” or a singer “off key,” even if you can’t come up with a technical explanation for your reaction. You have learned a lot about music just growing up as a member of society, although much of that knowledge rests below the level of conscious awareness.

In everyday life, people often do not think carefully about the music they hear. Much popular music is in fact designed not to call critical attention to itself (a good example of this is the multimillion-dollar “environmental music” industry, pioneered by the Muzak Corporation). Other types of popular music—funk, punk rock, hard rap, thrash metal—seek to grab your attention, but do not by and large encourage you to engage them analytically. The point of analyzing popular music is not to ruin your enjoyment of it. Rather, we want to encourage you to expand your tastes, to hear the roots of today’s music in earlier styles, and in the final analysis, to be a more critically aware “consumer” of popular music.

Formal analysis—listening for musical structure, its basic building blocks and the ways in which they are combined—can tell us a lot about popular music. We can, for example, discover that recordings as different as Little Richard’s rock ‘n’ roll anthem “Tutti Frutti,” James Brown’s “I Got You (I Feel Good),” The Doors’ “Riders on the Storm,” and the theme song of the 1960s TV show *Batman* all share the same basic musical structure, the twelve-bar blues form (to be discussed in Chapter 2). Similarly, tunes as diverse as Frank Sinatra’s version of “Love and Marriage,” the Penguins’ 1955 doo-wop hit “Earth Angel,” “Yesterday” by the Beatles, and the theme of the 1960s cartoon show (and the 1993 film) *The Flintstones* all have an AABA melodic structure. You don’t have to worry about such technicalities yet; there will be ample opportunity to discuss them later on. The point here is simply to suggest that a lot of popular music draws on a limited number of basic formal structures.

Structure is not the only important dimension of music. In order to analyze the way popular music actually sounds—the grain of a singing voice, the flow of a dance groove, or the gritty sound of an electric guitar—we must complement formal analysis with the analysis of musical process. To adopt a biological analogy, there is an important difference between understanding the structure of an organism—

its constituent parts and how they are related—and the processes that bring these parts and relationships to life. Popular songs may be analyzed not only as composed “works” with their own internal characteristics but also as interpretations by particular performers: in other words, one must understand not only song but also singing.

Traditional musicology, which focuses on the written scores that serve as the model for performances in classical music, is often of little relevance in helping us to understand popular music. In this book we frequently use concepts directly relevant to popular music itself: for example, **riff**, a repeated pattern designed to generate rhythmic momentum; **hook**, a memorable musical phrase or riff; and **groove**, a term that evokes the channeled flow of “swinging” or “funky” or “phat” rhythms.

Another important aspect of musical process is **timbre**, the quality of a sound, sometimes called “tone color.” Timbre plays an important role in establishing the “soundprint” of a performer. Play just five seconds of a recording by, say, Aretha Franklin, Bruce Springsteen, Bonnie Raitt, Dr. Dre, or Bono, and any knowledgeable listener will be able to identify the singer by the “grain” of his or her voice.

Instrumental performers may also have highly memorable “soundprints.” Some—for example, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, and Eddie Van Halen—have become superstars. Others remain unknown to the general listening public, although their soundprints are very familiar: for example, James Jamerson, the master bassist of Motown; King Curtis, whose gritty tenor saxophone is featured on dozens of soul records from the 1960s; and Steve Gadd, studio drummer par excellence, who played on records by Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Barbra Streisand, Steely Dan, and Paul Simon during the 1970s.

Recording engineers, producers, arrangers, and record labels may also develop unique soundprints. We will encounter many examples of this: the distinctive “**slap-back**” echo of Elvis Presley’s early recordings on Sun Records; the quasi-symphonic teen pop recordings produced by Phil Spector; the stripped-down, “back to basics” soul sound of Stax Records in Memphis; and the immense sampled bass drum explosions used by engineer Steve Ett of Chung House of Metal, one of the most influential hip-hop studios. You will learn more about the creative contributions of arrangers, engineers, and producers as we go along; for now, you should simply note that the production of a particular “sound” often involves many individuals performing different tasks.

Lyrics—the words of a song—are another important aspect of popular music. In many cases words are designed to be one of the most immediately accessible parts of a song. In other cases—for example, the songs of Bob Dylan, John Lennon and Paul McCartney, David Byrne, Prince, Beck, or Ice-T—the lyrics seem to demand interpretation, and fans take a great deal of pleasure from the process of figuring them out.

Dialect has also been a crucial factor in the history of American popular music. Some musical genres are strongly associated with particular dialects (country music with southern white dialects, rap music with certain urban black dialects, 1970s punk rock with working-class British dialects). The ability of African American artists such as Chuck Berry and Diana Ross to “cross over” to a white middle-class audience was to some degree predicated upon their adoption of a dialect widely used in the mass media. In other cases, the mutual incomprehensibility of varieties of English has been consciously emphasized, particularly in recordings aimed at

consumption within ethnic communities. There are sometimes very good reasons not to be understood by the majority.

These are some of the dimensions of popular musical style to keep in mind as you work your way through this book. Think about what attracts you to the music you like: the texture of a voice, the power of a guitar, the emotional insight of a lyric, the satisfying predictability of a familiar tune, the physical momentum of a rhythm. This is what makes popular music important to people: its sound, the sense it makes, and the way it feels.

THEME TWO: MUSIC AND IDENTITY

None of us is born knowing who we are—we all learn to be human in particular ways, and music is one important medium through which we formulate and express our identity. Think back to the very first pop song you remember hearing as a little kid, when you were, say, five years old. Odds are you heard it at home, or maybe in a car, or (depending on your age) over a transistor radio or a portable CD player at the beach. The person playing it may have been one of your parents, or an older brother or sister. These are often the people who influence our early musical values, and it is they whose values we sometimes emphatically reject later in life. In elementary school, other kids begin to influence our taste, a development closely connected with the ways in which we form social groups based on gender, age, and other factors (boys versus girls, fifth graders versus first graders, cool kids versus nerds).

As we move into adolescence, popular music also enters our private lives, providing comfort and continuity during emotional crises and offering us the opportunity to fantasize about romance and rebellion. Pop music provides images of gender identity, culturally specific ways of being masculine and feminine. Ethnicity and race—including notions of how to act authentically “white” or “black” or “Latino”—are also powerfully represented in popular music.

As you grow older, a song or a singer’s voice may suddenly transport you back to a specific moment and place in your life, sometimes many decades earlier. Like all human beings, we make stories out of our lives, and music plays an important role in bringing these narratives to life. Some popular songs—for example, the Beatles’ “In My Life,” Don McLean’s “American Pie,” Bob Seger’s “Night Moves,” and Missy Elliott’s “Back in the Day”—are really about memory and the mixed feelings of warmth and loss that accompany a retrospective view of our own lives.

Popular music in America has from the very beginning been closely tied up with stereotypes, convenient ways of organizing people into categories. It is easy to find examples of stereotyping in American popular music: the common portrayal in song lyrics and music videos of women as sexual objects, and the association of men with violence; the image of African American men as playboys and gangsters; the stereotype of southern white musicians as illiterate, backwoods “rednecks”; the association of songs about money with supposedly Jewish musical characteristics; and the caricatures of Asian and Latin American people found in novelty songs right up through the 1960s.

Stereotyping is often a double-edged sword. In certain cases popular performers have helped to undermine the “commonsense” association of certain styles with



Aerosmith's **Steven Tyler** in concert. © Henry Ditz/CORBIS

certain types of people: the black country singer Charley Pride and the white blues musician Stevie Ray Vaughan are just two examples of performers whose styles challenge stereotyped conceptions of race and culture. The history of popular music in the United States is also replete with examples of minority groups who have reinterpreted derogatory stereotypes and made them the basis for distinctive forms of musical creativity and cultural pride—"Say It Loud, I'm Black and Proud," "Okie from Muskogee," "(At the) YMCA."

Why do people make and listen to music? What do they want from it, and what does it give them? These questions take us beyond the central concern of classic aesthetic theory, the creation and appreciation of "beauty for beauty's sake." People value music for many reasons, including a desire for beauty, but also a great deal more: they use music to escape from the rigors of the work week, to celebrate important events in their lives, to help them make money, war, and love. To understand the cultural significance of popular music, we must examine both the music—its tones and textures, rhythms and forms—and the broader patterns of social identity that have shaped Americans' tastes and values.

THEME THREE: MUSIC AND TECHNOLOGY

From the heyday of printed sheet music in the nineteenth century through the rise of the phonograph record, network radio, and sound film in the 1920s, right up to

the present era of digital recording, computerized sampling, and Internet-based radio, technology has shaped popular music and has helped disseminate it, more and more rapidly, to more and more people. Technology doesn't determine the decisions made by a musician or an audience, but it can make a particular range of choices available to them.

It has often been argued that the mass media create a gap between musicians and their audiences, a distance that often encourages us to forget that the music we hear is made by other human beings. To what degree has technology affected our relationship to music and, more importantly, to other people? This is by no means a simple issue. Some critics of today's musical technology would say that a much higher percentage of Americans were able to perform music for their own enjoyment a century ago, when the only way of experiencing music was to hear it performed live or to make it yourself. This decline in personal music making is generally attributed to the influence of mass media, which are said to encourage passive listening. However, nationwide sales figures for musical instruments—including electronic instruments such as digital keyboards and drum pads—suggest that millions of people in the United States are busy making music.

In addition, although the mass media can encourage passivity, people aren't always passive when they listen to recorded music. Have you ever pretended to be a favorite musician while listening to music by yourself, perhaps even mimicking onstage movements (playing "air guitar" or "virtual drums")? Have you ever embarrassed yourself by unconsciously singing along with your iPod in a public setting? When you listen over headphones, don't you enter into the music in your imagination and in an important sense help to "make" the music?

Although we tend to associate the word "technology" with novelty and change, older technologies often take on important value as tokens of an earlier—and, it is often claimed, better—time. Old forms of musical "hardware" and "software"—music boxes, player pianos, phonographs, sheet music, and 78 r.p.m., 45 r.p.m., and long-playing (LP) discs—become the basis for subcultures made up of avid collectors. In some cases, older music technologies are regarded as qualitatively superior to the new. For example, some contemporary musicians make a point of using analog rather than digital recording technology. This decision is based on the aesthetic judgment that analog recordings, which directly mirror the energy fluctuations of sound waves, "sound better" than digital recordings, which break sound waves down into packets of information. Musicians who prefer analog recording say that it is "warmer," "richer-sounding," and somehow "more human" than digital recording.

Sometimes the rejection of electronic technology functions as an emblem of "authenticity," as, for example, in MTV's recently revived *Unplugged* series, where rockers such as Eric Clapton, R.E.M., and Nirvana demonstrate their "real" musical ability and sincerity by playing on acoustic instruments. However, there are also many examples of technologies being used in ways that encourage active involvement, including the manipulation of multiple record turntables by hip-hop DJs and the increasing popularity of karaoke singalong machines and computer software in American nightclubs and homes. If it is true that technology has been used in cynical ways to manipulate the public into buying certain kinds of music, it is also the case that people often exert creative control over the role of musical machines in their own lives.



One of the earliest FM radio stations, Alpine, New Jersey, 1948. Courtesy Library of Congress.

THEME FOUR: THE MUSIC BUSINESS

To understand the history of American popular music, it is necessary that we learn about the workings of the music business. The production of popular music typically involves the work of many individuals performing different roles. From the nineteenth century until the 1920s, sheet music was the principal means of disseminating popular songs to a mass audience. This process typically involved a complex network of people and institutions: the **composer** and **lyricist** who wrote a song; the publishing company that bought the rights to it; song pluggers, who promoted the song in stores and convinced big stars to incorporate it into their acts; the stars themselves, who often worked in shows that toured along a circuit of theaters controlled by yet other organizations; and so on, right down to the consumer, who bought the sheet music and performed it at home.

The rise of radio, recording, and movies as the primary means for popularizing music added many layers of complexity to this process. Today hundreds of people will have had a hand in producing the music you listen to. In mainstream pop music, the composer and lyricist are still important; the songs they write are reworked to complement a particular performer's strengths by an **arranger**, who decides which instruments to use, what key the song should be in, how many times it should be repeated, and a host of other details. The **A&R** (artists and repertoire) personnel of a record company seek out talent, often visiting nightclubs and rehearsals to hear new groups. The **producer** of a record plays several roles: convincing the board of directors of a record company to back a particular project, shaping the development of new "talent," and often intervening directly in the recording process. Engineers work in the studio, making hundreds of important decisions about the balance between voice and instruments, the use of effects such as echo and **reverb**, and other factors that shape the overall "sound" of a record. The publicity department plans the advertising campaign, and the public relations department handles interactions with the press.

This is only the barest outline of the interlocking roles involved in the production and promotion of popular music today. Business agents, video producers, graphic artists, copy editors, record stores, stage hands, truck drivers, T-shirt companies, and the companies that produce musical hardware—often owned by the same corporations that produce the recordings—also play vital roles in this process. It is hard to know where to draw the boundaries of an industry that has extended itself into so many aspects of commerce and culture.

In addition, many of the roles described above have become intermingled in complex ways. A person such as Quincy Jones, for example, is a performer, a songwriter, an arranger, a producer (who makes lots of engineering decisions), and a record label executive. And the wider availability of digital recording equipment means that some performers may also act as their own arranger, producer, and engineer (Stevie Wonder and Prince are good examples of this collapsing of roles).

Theodor Adorno, a German philosopher who wrote in the 1940s and 1950s, powerfully criticized the effects of capitalism and industrialization on popular music. He suggested that the music industry promotes the illusion that we are all highly independent individuals defined by our personal tastes—"I'm a country fan," "You're a metalhead." In fact, Adorno argued, the industry manipulates the notion of personal taste to sucker us into buying its products. Emotional identification with the wealthy superstars portrayed on television and in film—the "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" syndrome—is, in Adorno's view, a poor substitute for the humane and ethical social relations that typify healthy communities.

In some ways Adorno was right: Americans are probably less individualistic than they like to think, and it is often true that record companies con us into buying the latest thing on the basis of tiny differences in musical style, rather like the little design changes that mark off different kinds of automobiles or tape decks or tennis shoes. And it is true that the private experience of listening over headphones—like the experience of driving alone in an automobile with the windows rolled up—can isolate people from one another.

But there's more to it than that. Just ask anyone who's worked in the music business and developed an ulcer trying to predict what the next trend will be. Compared to other industries that produce consumer products, the music business is

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