

CHAPTER
19

GUIDED READING *Popular Culture*

Section 3

A. As you read this section, take notes to answer questions about innovations and trends in 1950s popular culture.

1. Television	a. What are some of the most popular shows produced?	b. What kinds of subjects did television tend to present?	c. What kinds of subjects did it tend to avoid?
2. Radio	a. How did radio change to compete with television?		b. What role did it play in popularizing African-American culture?
3. Film	How did movies change to compete with television?		
4. The beat movement	a. Who were the most famous beat writers?	b. What were the movement's chief characteristics?	
5. Rock 'n' roll	a. Who helped to popularize rock 'n' roll?	b. What were rock's chief characteristics?	

B. On the back of this paper, explain the purpose of the **Federal Communications Commission (FCC)**.

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19

Section 3

SKILLBUILDER PRACTICE *Primary and Secondary Sources*

How did mainstream America in the 1950s react to rock 'n' roll? One way to find out is to look at the media reports of the time. Read this excerpt from a Time magazine article, then answer the questions at the bottom of the page. (See Skillbuilder Handbook, p. R22.)

In Boston, Roman Catholic leaders urged that the offensive music be boycotted. In Hartford, city officials considered revoking the State Theater's license after several audiences got too rowdy during a musical stage show. In Washington the police chief recommended banning such shows from the National Guard Armory after brawls in which several people were injured. In Minneapolis a theater manager withdrew a film featuring the music after a gang of youngsters left the theater, snake-danced around town and smashed windows. In Birmingham champions of white supremacy decried it as part of a Negro plot against the whites. At a wild concert in Atlanta's baseball park one night, fists and beer bottles were thrown, four youngsters were arrested.

The object of all this attention is a musical style known as "rock 'n' roll," which has captivated U.S. adolescents as swing captivated prewar teen-agers and ragtime vibrated those of the '20s. It does for music what a motorcycle club at full throttle does for a quiet Sunday afternoon.

Rock 'n' roll is based on Negro blues, but in a self-conscious style which underlines the primitive qualities of the blues with malice aforethought.

Characteristics: An unrelenting, socking syncopation that sounds like a bull whip; a choleric saxophone honking mating-call sounds; an electric guitar turned up so loud that its sound shatters and splits; a vocal group that shudders and exercises violently to the beat while roughly chanting either a near-nonsense phrase or a moronic lyric in hillbilly idiom.

Sample:

*Long tall Sally has a lot on the ball
Nobody cares if she's long and tall
Oh, Baby! Yeh-heh-heh-hes, Baby
Whoo-oo-oo-oo, Baby! I'm havin' me
some fun tonight, yeah. . . .*

Does rock-'n'-roll music itself encourage any form of juvenile delinquency? . . . Pop Record Maker Mitch Miller, no rock 'n' roller, sums up for the defense: "You can't call any music immoral. If anything is wrong with rock 'n' roll, it is that it makes a virtue out of monotony." For the prosecution, the best comment comes indirectly from Actress Judy Holliday in *Born Yesterday*: It's just not couth, that's all.

from *Time* (June 18, 1956), 54.

1. What is the source of this information? _____

2. Is the source qualified to report on this subject? Explain. _____

3. What is the tone of the article? _____

4. Are there more statements of fact or of opinion? Underline all statements of opinion in the article.

5. Would this be a good source of information about attitudes toward rock 'n' roll in the '50s? Explain.

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19

RETEACHING ACTIVITY *Popular Culture*

Section 3

A. Matching

Match the description in the second column with the person in the first column. Write the appropriate letter next to the word.

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| _____ 1. Allen Ginsburg | a. called television a “vast wasteland” |
| _____ 2. Miles Davis | b. unofficial “King of Rock ‘n’ Roll” |
| _____ 3. Jack Kerouac | c. prominent beat poet |
| _____ 4. James Dean | d. innovative jazz artist |
| _____ 5. Elvis Presley | e. popular fifties movie star |
| _____ 6. Newton Minow | f. wrote beat novel <i>On the Road</i> |

B. Completion

Complete each sentence with the appropriate term or name.

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| television | beats |
| racism | African Americans |
| western | conformity |
| Asian Americans | poverty |

- For the most part, television in the 1950s omitted references to controversial issues, such as _____ and _____.
- Rock ‘n’ roll owes much of its sound to earlier music performed by _____.
- By 1960, a _____ could be found in nearly 90 percent of American homes.
- Members of the beat movement rebelled against what they viewed as too much _____ in America.
- One popular genre of the early television was the _____.

CHAPTER
19

AMERICAN LIVES

Milton Berle

The Rise and Fall of a Television Star

Section 3

"In a sense, [the comedy-variety television show] all goes back to Berle."
—*Variety magazine (1958)*

Milton Berle has spent almost his entire life in show business. A wild comedian known for his crazy visual humor, he became famous as the first major star of television. However, his star fell almost as quickly as it rose, and to people under forty, he is virtually an unknown name today.

Born in 1908, Berle was entertaining people in his New York City neighborhood as a five-year-old. He soon appeared in movies and became part of a vaudeville act. Vaudeville was a popular stage entertainment that thrived from about 1900 to the 1920s. It combined singing, dancing girls, and rowdy comedians. Comedy became Berle's life. He told jokes. He wore funny costumes. He took a fall or had someone in the cast throw a pie in his face. As long as it got a laugh, Berle would do it.

He became a headliner—the top draw in the roster of acts in a vaudeville show. He also became the master of ceremonies at New York's Palace Theater, the most famous vaudeville house of all. Often, when he heard another comedian's funny line, he used it in his own act. For his habit of taking other people's material, he was called "The Thief of Bad Gags," a pun on *The Thief of Baghdad*, a popular movie of the day.

Starting in the late 1920s, radio became a popular mass entertainment. Berle tried to take advantage of the new medium. He had six different shows, searching for a formula that would work. However, while a studio audience might laugh uproariously at his craziness on stage, people at home, of course, could not see what he was doing. Each show was canceled.

In the late 1940s, Berle got another chance. He sensed that television was the perfect vehicle, giving the home audience the chance to see his gags. In 1948 he signed to host a variety show. That year he rotated with six other hosts, but his physical humor attracted viewers like nobody else. More than 90 percent of all homes with a television set watched when he was host. At the time, those homes were still very few—only 1 percent of the

country. Berle, though, helped change that. Sales of television sets shot up—200,000 a month in 1948 and 1949.

In 1949, Berle became the sole host of the show. *Variety* magazine, which reports on the entertainment industry, said that on Tuesday nights, when Berle's show was broadcast, attendance at theaters and night clubs dropped. Berle was hailed as "Mr. Television." *Time* and *Newsweek* both did cover stories about him. Fearing he might go elsewhere, his network signed him to a contract for 30 years.

However, just as quickly, Berle's popularity fell. At first televisions were owned mostly by people living in cities in the East and Midwest. More and more, in the early 1950s, television owners lived in the South and West and in rural areas. Berle's humor had less appeal to them. They found his insider jokes about New York City unfunny. Also, his loud pranks grew stale. As another early television star later noted, "I don't care who you are. Finally you'll get on people's nerves if they get too much of you." So, Berle's ratings slipped. He fell to third place in the 1951–1952 season and did not even reach the top ten in 1954–1955. Within a couple years, he was off the air. Two attempts to revive his show failed.

Though his show had ended, Berle kept on entertaining. He appeared on variety shows and situation comedies and even acted in dramatic roles—one time winning an Emmy award. He made a few movies in the 1970s and 1980s and continued to work night clubs. In the 1990s he has only rarely appeared on television—mostly at celebrity roasts and award shows.

Questions

1. Why did Berle not succeed in radio?
2. What two factors led to Berle's declining popularity on television?
3. What does the rise and fall of Berle's career suggest about celebrity?