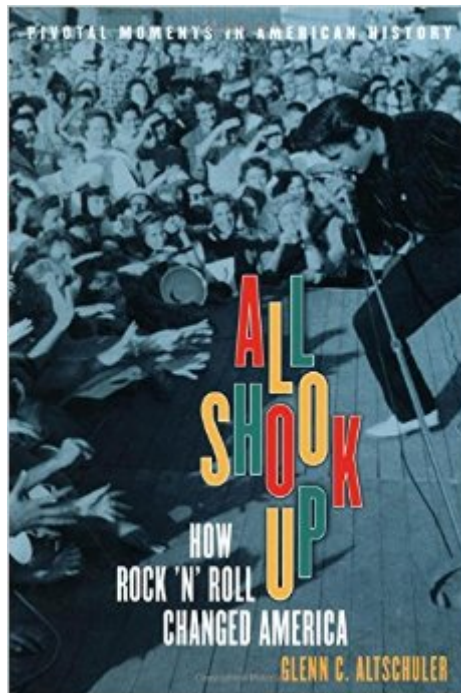


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All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America (Pivotal Moments In American History)



Synopsis

The birth of rock 'n roll ignited a firestorm of controversy--one critic called it "musical riots put to a switchblade beat"--but if it generated much sound and fury, what, if anything, did it signify? As Glenn Altschuler reveals in *All Shook Up*, the rise of rock 'n roll--and the outraged reception to it--in fact can tell us a lot about the values of the United States in the 1950s, a decade that saw a great struggle for the control of popular culture. Altschuler shows, in particular, how rock's "switchblade beat" opened up wide fissures in American society along the fault-lines of family, sexuality, and race. For instance, the birth of rock coincided with the Civil Rights movement and brought "race music" into many white homes for the first time. Elvis freely credited blacks with originating the music he sang and some of the great early rockers were African American, most notably, Little Richard and Chuck Berry. In addition, rock celebrated romance and sex, rattled the reticent by pushing sexuality into the public arena, and mocked deferred gratification and the obsession with work of men in gray flannel suits. And it delighted in the separate world of the teenager and deepened the divide between the generations, helping teenagers differentiate themselves from others. Altschuler includes vivid biographical sketches of the great rock 'n rollers, including Elvis Presley, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Buddy Holly--plus their white-bread doppelgangers such as Pat Boone. Rock 'n roll seemed to be everywhere during the decade, exhilarating, influential, and an outrage to those Americans intent on wishing away all forms of dissent and conflict. As vibrant as the music itself, *All Shook Up* reveals how rock 'n roll challenged and changed American culture and laid the foundation for the social upheaval of the sixties.

Book Information

Series: Pivotal Moments in American History

Paperback: 240 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press (December 9, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195177495

ISBN-13: 978-0195177497

Product Dimensions: 9.2 x 0.8 x 6.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (25 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #62,527 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #107 inÂ Books > Humor &

Entertainment > Sheet Music & Scores > Forms & Genres > Popular #107 inÂ Books > Arts & Photography > Music > History & Criticism #145 inÂ Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Rock

Customer Reviews

I just finished reading, "All Shook Up." Although some of Altschuler's sociological themes are very interesting, particularly those dealing with the lingering effects of rock and roll on white America, his discussions of the formative years of rock and roll and the seminal crossover influences are very weak, and from my perspective, inaccurate and superficial. Altschuler would like the reader to believe that it was primarily big name individuals (Presley, Berry, Boone, Nelson, etc.) who were the most influential in bringing rock and roll to the general culture. Although individual musicians played an important role in the evolution of rock and roll, it was the early rhythm and blues and doo wop groups that provided the most important and earliest crossover influences. There are many other books dealing with the early influence of such groups, but in this book, they are given relatively little attention compared to individual singers. Also, having grown up in the forties and fifties in Brooklyn, New York, my recollections are quite different from the accounting presented in this book. By the time Presley, Berry and other individuals mentioned in this book arrived on the scene, the crossover process was well underway. What happened before Presley, etc. is a critical part of the historical record and warrants much more attention than is presented in this book. In reading this book, I had the same feeling that I have had visiting the Rock and Roll of Fame - the creative and historical influences of rock and roll on our culture are lost, relatively speaking, to name recognition occurring several generations down the road.

"All Shook Up - How Rock `N' Roll Changed America" by Glenn Altschuler is a terrific and well documented book on the seismic social, sexual and racial changes in the United States that was both reflected and precipitated by a new music sweeping the nation in the 1950s and 1960s. This new music with its roots deeply entrenched in largely black American R&B and Gospel literally shook a nation that wanted to believe itself innocent but was undergoing rapid change with the return of combat vets, the ensuing Baby Boom and the suburbanization of our country. Disposable income was rapidly on the rise and technological marvels of the day, such as the transistor radio, rapidly spread this revolutionary new music. Altschuler does a superb job in his narrative documenting this revolution from both a societal and a musical perspective. He is perhaps at his best in describing the backlash against rock and roll as it began break in a color barrier that was still

sacred to many, mostly white, Americans. He quotes authors of the day, "with tom-toms and hot jive and ritualistic orgies of erotic dancing, weed-smoking and mass mania, with African jungle background. Many music shops purvey dope; assignations are made in them. White girls are recruited for colored lovers . . . and guarantee a new generation subservient to the Mafia". Obviously some strong backlash. Oxford University Press is to be commended along with the editors of this series, Pivotal Moments in American History, David Hackett Fischer and James M. McPherson for living true to their words of historical interpretation and reporting "they were the results of decisions and actions by people who had opportunities to choose and to act otherwise". Also by showing "increasing sensitivity to issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in the context of large structures and processes". This volume is a classical one of American Studies, an interdisciplinary review of a period of time where social change was rapid. Researching or writing about this time through the lens of only one discipline would clearly have short-changed this era. Neither Altschuler nor Fischer and McPherson allowed that to occur and, in a sense, showed academic bravery for writing a serious book about our social history with rock and roll interwoven throughout.

"All Shook Up" is bold; Altschuler uses it as a platform to demand the recognition of rock 'n' roll in the history of America. The culture of music was pivotal, as Altschuler's thesis implies, and as a reader, I am inclined to believe it. The narratives he chose were purposeful and insightful--highlighting the struggle, the separation, and the uniqueness of the United States in the 1950s. Also narrowing the history lesson to only that decade shows Altschuler's discipline as an author--especially considering the 'guts and glory' came from the later sex and drug attitudes added to the rock 'n' roll lifestyle in the '60s and '70s. But back in the age of Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis, racial, generational, and political attitudes were all addressed, questioned, and formed as a result of the culture of rock 'n' roll. Technological advances in radios and music equipment also bolstered the role of musicians in the lives of millions--especially the young generations born into post-WWII affluence and leisure. The kids wanted to shake, rattle, and roll while the parents wanted to protect their kids from those wants. Sexuality was launched in the public sphere as music icons like T-Bone Walker and Elvis shook, rattled, and rolled an impressionable crowd. As a result, a generation gap had formed six strings wide. But while family units felt the strain of musical expression, a bond was formed between white and black teenagers sharing in a common identity. Talent took precedence over race and all the while, African Americans could boast of creating rock 'n' roll to begin with. The Cold War brought with it an anxiety that found an escape in the full-bodied

rhythms of a Fender guitar and harmonization of a couple of doo-woppers. Rock 'n' roll represented everything older and more conservative Americans feared post-war: rebellion in thought, transformation in society, and differences in culture. Altschuler gracefully addresses these limitations while also considering the capitalistic conforming consumerism of the era. A passionate 300-page glimpse into American popular culture, "All Shook Up" is as enjoyable as it is knowledgeable.

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