

Rock and roll! Seriously, rock and roll - that's what we're talking about today. And while we all agree that rock and roll will never die, we still debate about its birth. But we're going to attempt to clear the picture a bit. In this version of the GeoSampler, we'll take a look at two facets of its origin. First, its very name "rock and roll" and, second, which song should be considered the genre's first. So, are you ready to rock and, uh, read?

ROCK STEADY

Say the words "rock and roll" and some legendary names immediately come to mind. But what about the name of the music genre itself? Where did the term "rock and roll" originate? Well, it's often attributed to Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed, but the phrase actually dates back much further than you think, and it wasn't always associated with music.

In its infancy, the phrase "rock and roll" was nautical, not musical.

In 1821, Richard Franck wrote these instructions: "... keep her steady in her passage, and preserve her from rocking and rolling..." In this instance the term was used to describe the combined fore and aft "rocking" and the port and starboard "rolling" motion of the ship.

Taking inspiration from this, it eventually took on sexual connotation in the early 19th century. The sea shanty, "Johnny Bowker" contains the lines "Oh do, my Johnny Bowker/Come rock and roll me over" —you know, typical sailor talk.

In the mid 19th century the term found its way into more and more songs, however, not in what has been often described as "the devil's music." In fact, it was just the opposite. "Rock" and "rocking and rolling" were used quite frequently in religious songs to describe the rapture worshippers would feel. The hymn "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep" was written in the 1830's by Emma Willard, a women's rights

activist from Connecticut who founded the Troy Female Seminary—not exactly Ozzy. And in a 1904 recording of "The Camp Meeting Jubilee" by the Hayden Quartet, you can hear the words "We've been rockin' and rolling in your arms ... In the arms of Moses." So it seems artists were singing about stairways to heaven long before 1971.

Then in 1922, Trixie Smith, an African American blues singer, recorded "My Man Rocks Me With One Steady Roll," which was one of the first known instances of having those two words together in a purely secular and sexual nature. And even though the music is far from the rock and roll we think of today, it helped to lay the groundwork for its increasingly popular use through the 1920's and 30's. It started appearing in jazz and even traditional country. Yep, your grandparents listened to and enjoyed "rock and roll"; they just didn't know it.

By the 1940's, the term "rock and roll" was being penned in record reviews in *Billboard* magazine. Columnist Maurie Orodener used it in his review of "Rock Me" with Lucky Millinder's band, describing the song with "rock-and-roll spiritual singing."

It wasn't until 1951, when Freed began broadcasting rhythm, blues and country for a multi-racial audience that the term "rock and roll" stuck. It's believed that he originally wanted to use the term "Moondog," in reference to a well-known

If you tried to give rock and roll another name, you might call it 'Chuck Berry.'
—John Lennon



Sing Along

some of the most misheard lyrics in rock.

"TINY DANCER"
BY ELTON JOHN
"Hold me closer,
Tony Danza."

Actually: "Hold me closer,
tiny dancer."

"BLINDED BY THE LIGHT"
BY MANFRED MANN
"Wrapped up like a
douche, another rumor
in the night."

Actually: "Revved up like
a Deuce, another runner
in the night."

"LIVIN' ON A PRAYER"
BY BON JOVI
"It doesn't make a
difference if we're
naked or not."

Actually: "It doesn't make a
difference if we make it or not."

"BAD MOON RISING"
BY CREEDENCE CLEARWATER
REVIVAL
"There's a bathroom
on the right."

Actually: "There's a bad moon
on the rise."



street musician Louis “Moondog” Hardin, but was sued and lost. Thank goodness. It’s hard to imagine getting a crowd pumped up by a lead singer belting out to the audience, “Are you ready to Moondog?!”

The who (who rocked first)

Some firsts are undeniable. First Tsar of Russia: Ivan IV (the Terrible). First man on the moon: Neil Armstrong. First rock and roll song: ummmmmm, well, that’s a bit cloudier. It’s a debate that has been going on for decades and one that doesn’t appear will be resolved any time soon. But of all the arguments you can have, it’s probably the most fun.

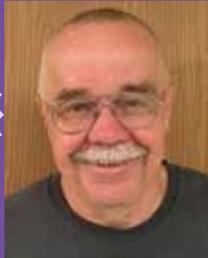
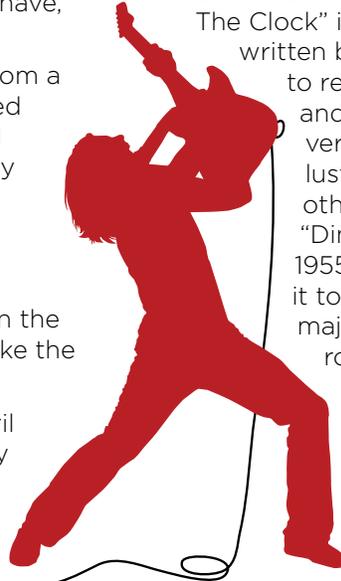
The list of candidates can range anywhere from a few dozen to close to 200 songs to be named “Rock’s First.” From Elvis Presley’s “That’s All Right (Mamma)” in 1954 to as far back as Roy Brown’s “Good Rockin’ Tonight” (1947), Wild Bill Moore’s “Rock and Roll” (1949) and The Chords “Sh-Boom” (1954). But there are two that always head to the front of the line, and whichever one comes out on top depends on the criteria that’s used in judging them. We’ll make the case for each.

First, “Rocket 88,” which was released in April 1951 and in reference to a model car made by Oldsmobile, was one of the first to feature and popularize the sound of a distorted electric guitar—an instrument, by the

way, that was born in the 1920’s. Although the song was credited to Jackie Brenston, it was actually Ike Turner’s Kings of Rhythm who performed it. It’s a twelve-bar blues song that went to #1 on the R&B charts. It has been covered many times over, including one time in June of 1951 by a country music group, Bill Haley and the Saddlemen. Yes, the Bill Haley we’re going to talk about next. Haley’s version experienced regional success in the northeast U.S., which began his journey that eventually led to our next song.

Like “Rocket 88,” Bill Haley & His Comets’ “Rock Around The Clock” is also a twelve-bar blues song and was written by 1952, but Bill Haley, he was not the first to record it. That distinction goes to Sonny Dae and His Knight. Haley didn’t record the famous version until April 12, 1954. It experienced lack-luster sales and play. But because of Haley’s other success with “Shake, Rattle and Roll” and “Dim, Dim The Lights,” it was included in the 1955 movie Blackboard Jungle, which exposed it to a much wider audience and launched it into major success. From there, it became the first #1 rock and roll song on the US pop charts and introduced rock into the mainstream.

So which is it? The song that laid the groundwork for the popularization of the genre? Or the song that actually did it? Who cares? It’s still rock and roll to us.



John Petrovay

John served in the United States Air Force from 1969-1973. He is an avid camper and member of the Lions Organization. His new favorite passtime is spending time with his granddaughter.



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