



# CAR CULTURE AND ROCK AND ROLL IN POSTWAR AMERICA

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did car culture intersect with and inspire Rock and Roll?

### OVERVIEW

In 1949, General Motors introduced the Oldsmobile 88. Dubbed “Futuramic” and advertised as “the lowest-priced car with a ‘rocket’ engine,” the sleek new vehicle epitomized an American fascination with speed, exploration, and space travel in the early 1950s. The Oldsmobile’s appeal was so widespread, that in 1951, Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats (an alternate name for Ike Turner’s Kings of Rhythm, with whom Brenston played saxophone and occasionally sang) recorded the song “Rocket 88” — an ode to the fantasy of driving the stylish car. Many historians would argue that “Rocket 88” was the first Rock and Roll song, citing the tremendous raw energy the band brought to the music. Without question, it signaled a connection between car culture and Rock and Roll.



Cars had been part of the American experience since the early twentieth century. In 1908, Henry Ford debuted his assembly-line produced Model T. The car’s relatively low price and interchangeable parts enabled many middle- and working class Americans to own, and maintain, a car for the first time. The auto industry boomed through the 1920s, but with the onset of the Great Depression, sales began a sharp decline. In early 1942, America’s entry into World War II necessitated a complete halt in the production of domestic passenger vehicles while auto factories were reconfigured for wartime contracts. With no new models available for the duration of the war, car culture was effectively on hiatus.

After the Allied powers achieved victory in both the Pacific and European theaters, Americans were filled with a sense of confidence, optimism, and national pride at levels they had never before experienced. Additionally, because the battles of WWII had not been fought on American soil, the U.S. was in a unique position not to rebuild from the destruction caused by the war, but rather to expand. As soldiers returned home and began to buy houses and start families, suburban communities developed around cities, necessitating not only new roads, but an abundance of brand new cars to drive those roads. By the time civilian auto production resumed in 1946, many Americans had not owned a new car since before

## OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

the Depression — if they had ever owned a car at all. With the postwar economy surging, car sales in the United States skyrocketed. The creation of an interstate highway system in 1956 further transformed where people lived, how they got around, who they socialized with, and how they spent their money. A rising population of teenagers, born after the war into a country enjoying an unprecedented surge of prosperity, soon forged an intense and energetic relationship with cars as they became old enough to receive their driver's permits.

By the early 1960s, the intersection of car culture and Rock and Roll was well-established and vibrant. Transistor radios became a standard feature on many new car models, allowing increasing numbers of Americans to listen to music while on the road. Songs including Chuck Berry's "No Money Down," Jan & Dean's "Surf City," and the Beach Boys' "Fun, Fun, Fun" emphasized the extent to which the automobile had captured the nation's imagination. The very act of driving had come to symbolize a new-found freedom of movement, particularly for American teenagers.

Using a selection of songs, statistics, television spots, archival films, and magazine advertisements, students investigate how the postwar resurgence of the U.S. automotive industry coincided with the rise of the teenager, the two intersecting in Rock and Roll culture.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The role of the Ford Motor Company in establishing private automobile ownership as an essential component of the American experience
- How the resurgence of automobile manufacturing after WWII coincided with the rise of teen culture
- The impact of the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 on life in postwar America
- How Rock and Roll acts including Chuck Berry and the Beach Boys brought together teenage interests in cars and Rock and Roll

### 2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Interpret a variety of archival magazine advertisements produced by the Ford Motor Company and General Motors between 1903-1950
- Discuss figurative and connotative meanings of Rock and Roll song lyrics portraying the confluence of teen and auto culture in the United States
- Common Core: Integrate quantitative analysis (e.g. charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text (CCSS Literacy in History/Social Studies 7)

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

**Play clip of Your Permit to Drive (1951). Students should take notes on any phrases the narrator uses to illustrate the societal effects of highways, cars, and driving. Ask students:**

- Why does the narrator refer to a driver's permit as a "round-trip travel ticket," a "passport to pleasure," and a "magic carpet"?
- How might having a car give daily life "new meaning" for millions of people? For a teenager?

**PROCEDURE:**

1. Display photograph from a 1959 issue of Life magazine illustrating the kinds of goods teens purchased in the 1950s. Explain that during the postwar years (approximately 1945-1968), teenagers became a distinct demographic, with many middle-class teens enjoying more leisure time, mobility, and more spending power than previous generations of young people.

Ask class to identify any recognizable items in the photograph, making sure that the students notice the two cars near the back of the image.



2. As a class, create a list of ways that having access to a car might affect a suburban teenager's lifestyle. List suggestions on the board. (Answers may include: cars give you the ability to travel to places where your friends hang out; the freedom to date; access to a job; space to listen to your own music; cars can be decorated or customized, etc.)

Note to teacher: If students live in an urban setting where car ownership is of less importance, ask students to imagine how having access to a car might affect the life of a teenager who does not live in an easily walkable city with access to a public transit system.

3. Distribute Handout 1: Car Culture in Rock and Roll Lyrics. Play audio clip

of Chuck Berry performing “No Money Down” (1955). Explain that Chuck Berry is considered one of the founding fathers of Rock and Roll music and that many of his songs present teenage themes and life experiences, such as school, dancing to popular music, and driving. Ask students:

- How does this song convey a sense of excitement about buying a new car?
- How do the lyrics convey a sense of youth?

Explain that we are now going to look at how cars became a commodity in the lives of millions of Americans, beginning in the early twentieth century.

4. Display 1903 and 1904 advertisements for two of the earliest Ford automobiles. Explain that cars began to appear in the U.S. during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because they could only be built by hand, one at a time, by highly skilled mechanics, cars were considered a luxury item, reserved only for the wealthiest Americans. Ask students:

- What phrases stand out in these two advertisements? (Answers might include: “In the eyes of the Chauffeur” and “Boss of the Road.”)
- What do these phrases suggest about the segment of the population who could afford a car around 1904?

Note to teacher: For reference, \$850 in 1904 is equal to about \$22,000 in 2015.



## PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

5. Display 1925 advertisements for the Ford Model T. Explain that in 1908, the Ford Motor Company revolutionized the automotive industry by introducing the Model T. Ask students:

- What phrases stand out in these three advertisements? (Answers should include: “You Can Own This Car Today,” “Have Fun with a Ford,” “Drive as You Pay,” and “Within means of millions.”)
- What are the people in these ads doing? How do the ads target middle- and working class Americans?
- How has the affordability of a car changed since the ads from 1903 and 1904? How might offering a payment plan allow more people to buy cars?



6. Distribute Handout 2: Early Car Culture. Read aloud as a class, then ask students:

- How were cars constructed before Henry Ford’s introduction of the assembly line? How did the assembly line help facilitate the beginning of a “car culture” in the United States?
- How were automobile production and sales affected by the Great Depression and America’s entry into World War II?
- Why was it important for Americans to make a decision between either making cars for civilian use or making tanks for the U.S. military during World War II? How might wartime rationing of manufactured goods have helped build a sense of national unity?
- How did automobile production and sales change

once again after the end of the war? What factors accounted for this change?

7. Explain that one of the first new cars to come on the market after World War II was the Oldsmobile 88, a model introduced by General Motors in 1949. Play audio clip of “Rocket 88” by Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats (1951). Students should use the lyric handout as a guide and pay attention to the advertisement for the Oldsmobile 88 seen in the video clip. Ask students:

- “Rocket 88” went to No. 1 on the Billboard Rhythm and Blues chart and is sometimes referred to as the first Rock and Roll song. How would you describe the rhythm of this song? How would you describe the mood of the vocals?
- How does the magazine ad for the Oldsmobile 88 portray a sense of optimism and progress as it relates to auto culture?
- Why do you think Americans insisted on having the opportunity to travel for pleasure and enjoy leisure time in the years following a depression and a war?



8. Play television commercial for the Oldsmobile 88 (1953). Explain that Mel Torme was a Pop singer with a career that began in the 1930s. After WWII, many companies began to feature celebrities in their advertising campaigns - a new idea at the time. While the music of Mel Torme helped to sell cars to adults, the teen audience of the 1950s looking for something more beat-driven and raw.

**PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)**

Ask students:

- How are the rhythm and vocals of this commercial jingle different from the rhythm and vocals of “Rocket 88” by Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats?
- Between the commercial jingle and “Rocket 88”, which song do you think appealed more to the tastes of teenagers? Why?

Explain that car culture wouldn’t have had the effects it did if it didn’t also have the infrastructure to cultivate changing driving behaviors in the United States.

9. Distribute Handout 3: The Highway Act of 1956 and Statistics on Automobile Production. Read aloud as a class, then ask students:

- How did the passage of the Highway Act of 1956 incentivize Americans to buy cars?

**Questions for Graph A**

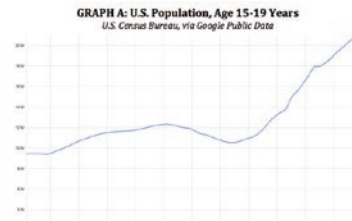
- What happens to the population of Americans aged 15-19 years just after the passage of the Highway Act in 1956? (It goes up considerably.)
- Why do you think this population segment changes so drastically at this particular time? (All of the children born during the early part of the Baby Boom, which began in 1946, are starting to become teenagers.)

**Questions for Graph B**

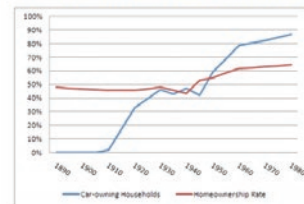
- How do the rates of homeownership and car ownership change around the start of the Great Depression in 1929? (Both rates decrease.)
- How does the rate of car ownership change once the United States enters WWII at the end of 1941? (It decreases again.) Why does the rate of car ownership decrease when the U.S. enters the war? (Because the auto manufacturers were not making new cars for civilians during the war.)
- What happens to the rates of homeownership and

car-owning households between 1945 and 1965? (They both increase). Which rate increases more? (Car-owning households goes up considerably more.)

- What conclusions can we make about the relationship between homeownership and car ownership after approximately 1950? (There is a big boom in homeownership, but a much bigger boom in auto sales, suggesting that many homeowners also own more than one car.)
- When a parent purchases a second car, who do you think is often times the recipient of the older car?



**GRAPH B: Rates of Car-owning Households and Home Ownership in the U.S.**  
Based on data from U.S. Census Bureau and car registration statistics



10. Display magazine advertisement for Ford from 1950. Ask students:



- What phrase stands out in this advertisement? What is the phrase referring to?
- What age do the “children” in this ad appear to be? What is the family depicted in this advertisement doing? (Teacher should read to the class that the teenagers are saying, “Don’t worry, Mom. If Pop isn’t back in time, we can take everything in the

## PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

Country Squire.”)

- How has Ford’s messaging changed since the ads we examined from before World War II?

10. Play clip of “Fun, Fun, Fun” by the Beach Boys (1964) and have students follow along with the lyrics on the lyric handout. Explain that much of the Beach Boys’ music in the early 1960s portrayed a teen lifestyle centered around surfing, young romance, and driving. Clarify that the “t-bird” referred to in the song

is slang for the Ford Thunderbird. Ask students:

- “Fun, Fun, Fun” reached No. 5 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. Why do you think this song had such wide appeal?
- Was there anything from our list from the beginning of the class that also appears in the lyrics to “Fun, Fun, Fun”?
- How does this song illustrate the relationship between teen culture and car culture that existed by early 1960s?

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Individually or as a class, read Handout 4: The End of Car Culture, excerpted from an article originally featured in the New York Times in 2013.

Ask students to write a short paragraph responding to the article. Briefly, how has the American teenage experience changed as a whole since the 1950s? Do you agree with the author’s claim that young people no longer value car ownership and driving?

## WRITING PROMPT:

Read “The End of Car Culture” in its entirety. Write a letter to the editor from the perspective of a teenager of driving age that either agrees with or disputes the author’s claim that young people no longer value cars or car ownership. Be sure to refer to evidence used in the article and make comparisons between the postwar era discussed in class and the values of teenagers today.

## EXTENSIONS:

1. Play audio clip of “Racing in the Street” by Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band (1978).

In 1979, Rock critic Greil Marcus wrote the following about Springsteen’s song: “[‘Racing in the Street’ is] the Beach Boys’ ‘Shut Down,’ ‘409,’ ‘Little Deuce Coupe,’ and ‘Don’t Worry Baby.’ Springsteen took the Beach Boys’ teenagers with their easy, obvious freedom, and dumped fifteen years on them; he made them grow up.”

Write an essay that discusses how Bruce Springsteen presents the car as a symbol in “Racing in the Street.” (Students should use lyric handout as a guide.) In addition to analyzing the imagery and mood of Springsteen’s song, your essay should respond to Marcus’ quote and compare and contrast with the song “Little Deuce Coupe” or another one of the Beach Boys songs mentioned above.

## EXTENSIONS: (CONTINUED)

2. Students will conduct independent research into how the “space race” - a historical period during which the United States and the U.S.S.R. competed to be the first country to land on the moon - shaped U.S. automotive design and car culture. Write an essay examining how America’s fascination with space travel and jet propulsion technology affected the way we designed, drove, sold, and thought about cars during the postwar era.
3. Students will research a driving-related song of their choice. Write a short essay discussing how the song relates to and expands upon the materials discussed in class, if and how it references any specific car models or driving-related social activities (if applicable), as well how the song illustrates the teenage idea of having a car. Students may select a song from the following list or choose another song with the teacher’s approval:

- The Beach Boys - “Don’t Worry Baby”
- The Beach Boys - “Little Deuce Coupe”
- The Beatles - “Drive My Car”
- Bruce Springsteen - “Thunder Road”
- Bruce Springsteen - “Used Cars”
- Charlie Ryan - “Hot Rod Lincoln”
- Chuck Berry - “No Particular Place to Go”
- The Clash - “Brand New Cadillac”
- Coolio - “Fantastic Voyage”
- Gary Numan - “Cars”
- The Hondells - “Little Honda”
- J. Frank Wilson and the Cavaliers - “Last Kiss”
- Jan & Dean - “Dead Man’s Curve”
- Jan & Dean - “Surf City”
- Johnny Cash - “One Piece at a Time”
- Kanye West - “Drive Slow”
- Neil Young with Stephen Stills - “Long May You Run”
- Prince - “Little Red Corvette”
- Queen - “I’m in Love With My Car”
- Ronny and the Daytonas - “G.T.O.”
- The Rip Chords - “Hey Little Cobra”
- The Shangri-Las - “Give Us Your Blessings”
- The Surfer Girls - “Draggin’ Wagon”
- Tracy Chapman - “Fast Car”
- The Trashmen - “A-Bone”
- War - “Low Rider”
- Wilson Pickett - “Mustang Sally”



## STANDARDS

### NEW JERSEY STATE LEARNING STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS: READING

NJSLSA.R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences and relevant connections from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

NJSLSRA.R4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

NJSLSA.R6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

NJSLSA.R7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

### NEW JERSEY STATE LEARNING STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS: WRITING

NJSLSA.W1: Write an argument to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and sufficient evidence.

NJSLSA.W8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

### NEW JERSEY STATE LEARNING STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS: SPEAKING AND LISTENING

NJSLSA.SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

NJSLSA.SL5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

### SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Theme 8: Science, Technology, and Society Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments

## NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

### *Core Music Standard: Responding*

Select: Choose music appropriate for a specific purpose or context.

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

### *Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

## RESOURCES

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- The Beach Boys – Fun, Fun, Fun (1964)
- Chuck Berry – No Money Down (1955)
- Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats – Rocket 88 (1951)
- Your Permit to Drive – General Motors Photographic (1951)
- The Beach Boys – Little Deuce Coupe (1964)
- Bruce Springsteen – Racing in the Street (1978)
- Television Commercial for the Oldsmobile (1953)

### FEATURED PEOPLE

- The Beach Boys
- Chuck Berry
- Jan and Dean
- Bruce Springsteen

### HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Car Song Lyrics (Excerpts)
- Handout 2: Early Car Culture
- Handout 3: The Highway Act of 1956 and Car Ownership Statistics
- Handout 4: The End of Car Culture