

# How Rock Music Changed America

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Historical Paper

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**Process Paper:**

I chose the topic of my paper because I wanted to do something that I felt was important to culture and something I loved. My dad introduced rock music to me when I was younger, I continued to enjoy each lyric to the songs I heard growing up. The music brought us together and taught me important lessons.

My topic (How Rock Music Changed America) relates to the National History Day theme (Frontiers in History: People, Places, and Ideas) because the music has been around for almost all major United States history. Some important people would be Chuck Berry, Kurt Cobain, and Ronald Reagan. Some places would be Seattle, Washington, Bitburg Cemetery in Germany, and Vietnam. Civil Rights, The Vietnam War, and feminism are some of the most influential ideas.

## **Introduction**

Rock music has had a huge impact in United States history. Rock music was there in all major United States events since the late 1940's. It played an under-appreciated role in the Vietnam War, by giving the United States hope and soldiers were able to relate to the lyrics of the harsh conditions they were in. Rock music was an influence during the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The music was able to connect people, realizing the need for social justice in the United States. Rock music was around in the 1980's, when Music Television (MTV) was created. From MTV being created, rock music was able to spread around faster, connecting people on their shared love for the music and the musicians. In the 1990's, different rock music genres submerged. The grunge and alternative rock scene brought people together through the dark lyrics that people were related to. Rock music spread the idea of women's rights. Since the late 1940's rock and roll has played a major role in history by supporting political change, social change, and economical change.

## **Background Information**

Rock music was made in the United States of America in the late 1940's, Rock and Roll (Rock N' Roll) was able to build a common culture between black and white teenagers. From this, unity was to come. This happened through the radio and records. Chuck Berry is the one who originated Rock and Roll. The song, "*Rockett 88*" (1951), sung by Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats' was the first ever Rock song to be

recorded. This is important because rock music could now be released and people were able to play it at their house, plus share it with their neighbors and family.

### **Historical Importance and Impacts**

From November 1, 1955 to April 30, 1975 the Vietnam War occurred. Music was used as a way to express the feeling about war and the victory that America believed they would have achieved. Songs about the war were proof that people were talking about the events and it was a safe way to express hesitation that many soldiers in the war felt at the time. The song, 'The Unknown Soldier' by The Doors is about showing empathy towards soldiers that go through the war and the ones who lost their lives. With songs like this, Americans were able to understand how important the war was and how it affected so many people. 'War' by Edwin Starr (1970) is an example of this. This song advocates for the importance of love, peace, and unity.

### **The Civil Rights Act of 1964**

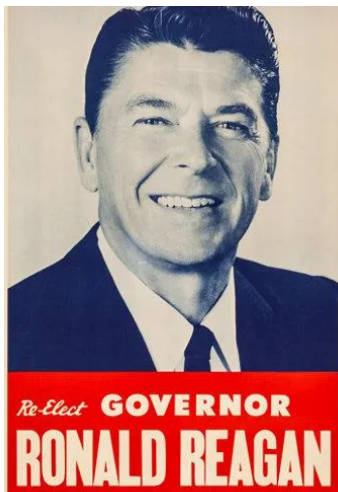
In 1964, congress passed Public Law 88-352 (78 Stat. 241). Also known as The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination for race, religion, sex, or national origin. Rock music played an important role in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, because it provided a voice for the African-American community and helped spread the message for equality and freedom. This Rock music was seen as a way for people to express who they are without someone telling who they are. The song 'Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud' by James Brown (1968) is about the fight against racism and the need for black empowerment among the people.

## The 1980's

In the 1980's, there was a change in Rock music. There was now more technology used. Autotune, synthesizers, and programmed drums created a new music sound wave. Whereas in the previous decades, the music was more defined by unedited sounds, with more raw vocals. In 1981, Music Television (MTV) came out! This created a way for people to see the music videos that were behind the song. In the United States, most bands became radio-friendly and became popular with the audiences. With rock music being played on MTV, this helped fill a culture gap between ages, race, and sexualities.

## Rock Music Against Ronald Reagan

During the 1980's there were a lot of anti-Ronald Reagan songs. 'My Brain is



Hanging Upside Down (Bonzo Goes To Bitburg)' by The Ramones (1985), describes Ronald Reagan's stop at the Bitburg Cemetery in Germany. This is where about 50 of the 2,000 interred are Nazi soldiers. When President Reagan visited he said, "I think that there is nothing wrong with visiting that cemetery where those young men are victims of Nazism also, even though they were fighting in the German uniform, drafted into service to carry out the hateful wishes of the

Nazis. They were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps."

Ronald Reagan was saying, the Nazi soldiers are victims to Nazism like the people who were in the Nazi concentration camps. 'I Shot the Devil' by Suicidal Tendencies

(1983) shows an extreme hate and want for political change. Their opening line is “I shot Reagan”.

### **Rock Music Supporting Feminism**

Within the music industry, there is sexism. Rock music is meant to be imperfect, have meaning, and groundbreaking, so female Rock artists have a difficult time being signed. There have been moments where female artists have made a stand and upheld



women's rights. Eddie Vedder, lead singer of Pearl Jam, wrote the words, “PRO CHOICE” on his arm during Pearl Jam's 1992 appearance on MTV

Unplugged. Feminism and Rock music overlapped constantly during the “Riot Grrrl Scene” from the

1990's. Kathleen Hanna, lead singer of *Bikini Kill*, *Le Tigre*, and *The Julie Ruin* said, “I would much rather be the obnoxious feminist girl than be complicit in my own dehumanization.” These musicians songs are honest about sexism and female rights. In ‘Double Dare Ya’ by Bikini Kill (1986), Kathleen Hanna sings about daring women to take a stand and do what they want to do and be who they want to be.

### **Grunge and Alternative Scene**

In the 1990's, Rock and Roll began to become less popular as compared to the grunge and alternative scene. Seattle, Washington is known for its original Starbucks coffee and coffee culture, different market places, and is the birth-place for Grunge and

Alternative music. Grunge and Alternative Rock music became popular with the younger generation, who were tired of the happy upbeat songs of other music genres. They related more with the dark lyrics about alienation, anxiety, and depression. These genres of music gave them a way to express how they were really feeling and helped people feel less alone. Grunge and Alternative Rock music brought people together. The musician's lyrics brought issues into pop culture and explored what it means to truly be yourself.

### **Conclusion**

Rock music has had a huge impact in United States history. Rock music was there in all major United States events since the late 1940's. This music genre has been present for some of the United States most important moments. Moments like, the Vietnam war, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the change for race, sexuality, and gender rights. The music has brought people together to fight for justice, human rights, political and movements. Important people that had great influence are Chuck Berry, Kurt Cobain, and Ronald Reagan. Some important places are Seattle, Washington, Bitburg Cemetery in Germany, and Vietnam. Civil Rights, The Vietnam War, and feminism are some of the most influential ideas. To end, rock music has played a major influence on political, social, and economic change.

## **Songs that Promoted Racial and Political Change**

### 1.) Radiohead - 'Idioteque' (2000)

- This is the band's most powerful protest song. Many people have interpreted the song's meaning to have to do with climate change, an issue that the band's main singer, Thom Yorke, is very passionate about.

### 2.) Sex Pistols - 'God Save The Queen' (1977)

- This song is an anti-government song that represents the treatment of the British working class during the 1970's.

### 3.) Green Day - 'Holiday' (2005)

- Green Day's album "American Idiot" is a whole political movement just by the title, but one of the most important songs is "Holiday," which is nearly a four-minute song against the President at the time (George W. Bush)

### 4.) Queen - 'I Want to Break Free' (1984)

- "I Want to Break Free" is a song about emancipation. It's about breaking out the social normatives that society holds us to. In the music video, the band members are featured dressed in women's clothes. This song has been used to fight against oppression.

### 5.) Bruce Springsteen - 'Born in the U.S.A' (1984)

- This was Bruce Springsteen's most successful song of his career, but the song was misunderstood from the beginning. "Born in the U.S.A" is a song defining America's poor treatment of the Vietnam veterans.

### 6.) Rage Against the Machine - 'Killing in the Name' (1992)

- Rap-metal band Rage Against the Machine used heavy, unique guitar riffs matched with strong lyrics to provide the message against racism and police brutality.

### **Songs for Women's Empowerment**

#### 1.) Bad Reputation - Joan Jett and The Black Hearts (1980)

- This song is saying that no matter what happens, she's going to be herself and doesn't care if she has a "Bad Reputation"

#### 2.) Asking For It - Hole (1994)

- This song calls out how females are objectified and often taken advantage of.

#### 3.) Just A Girl - No Doubt (1995)

- The former frontwoman for No Doubt, Gwen Stefani, wrote this song about how people treat her because she's a woman in a world that favors men.

#### 4.) I Wanna Be Where The Boys Are - The Runaways (1977)

- This track is about refusing to be compared to the expectations that are placed on women and wanting to be treated the way that men are.

#### 5.) The Opener - Camp Cope (2018)

- The band calls out sexism in the music industry with this song. It highlights how women have never received the same amount of opportunities that men do.

#### 6.) This Is Serious - Lunachicks (1992)

- '*This Is Serious*' is about how women deserve to be in the rock music scene just as much as everyone else does.

1.) MONROE - Crawlers (2021)

- This song talks about how ageism impacts the women in the entertainment industry. That women are expected to be washed up by their 30's and how their beauty is seen as more important than any of their other traits.

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