

History of Rock Music
Mr. Tesler's Classes

Essential Question: How did teenagers become a distinct demographic group in the 1950s?

In the early 20th century, the period between childhood and adulthood was simply called *adolescence*, a passing phase between the two main periods in one's life. But in the postwar period, this age cohort – now known as *teenagers* – developed a distinct identity and established itself as an important demographic group that would come to have enormous influence on American life.

Because of the postwar economic boom, many white, middle-class teenagers had more leisure time and more spending power than previous generations of young people. If they held jobs, they were increasingly able to keep their earnings rather than contribute them to the support of the family, as they generally did in early generations. American business soon realized the enormous potential of this emerging market, gearing advertising of everything from soda pop to cars in order to cash in on teens' growing purchasing power. Companies in every segment of the entertainment world -- records, radio, television, movies – were not far behind. Recognizing the affinity of this new demographic for Rock and Roll, they soon shaped a mass-market phenomenon out of what in the early 1950s had been a music confined to a handful of stations aimed at African-American listeners.

In this lesson, students will investigate how teenagers became a distinct demographic group with its own identity in the postwar years, and, in turn, how their influence helped push Rock and Roll into the mainstream. In so doing, they helped secure Rock and Roll's place as the most important popular music of the 20th century.

Part I:

Carefully study the lyrics to Chuck Berry's "[School Days](#)", then answer the following.

- Who is the "you" in the song?
- What happens to the person in the song?
- What audience do you imagine Chuck Berry had in mind when he recorded this song in 1957? Who did he think might buy the record?
- What conclusions can you draw from this song about the influence of teenagers on popular music in the 1950s?

Part II:

Carefully study the two images below.

[Image 1](#)

[Image 2](#)

Complete the chart, based on the images

What I See	What I Think	Questions I have

Based on the pictures, answer the following.

- How old are the people in the pictures?
- What is the girl in the first picture doing?
- What are the boys and girls in the second picture doing?
- What do you imagine the girl in the first picture does with the money she earns? Does she keep it for herself, or use it to help support her family?
- Do you think the boys and girls in the second picture have jobs? Why or why not? What kinds of jobs might they have?
- If they do have jobs, what do you think they do with the money they earn? Do they keep it for themselves, or use it to help support their families?
- What do these images suggest about how much leisure time middle-class teenagers had in the postwar years, compared to earlier times? About how much spending money they had?

Part III:

Average weekly income of a teenage boy (allowance plus job earnings)

1946	1956
\$2.41	\$8.96

Source: *Time* magazine, "Bobby-Soxers' Gallup," Aug. 13, 1956

- How much more did the average teenage boy have to spend per week in 1956 than in 1946?
- What kinds of things do you imagine the teenager in 1956 would have spent this money on?
- If teenagers in this era were able to spend more money on themselves than teens in earlier times, how do you think this might have affected their relationship with their parents?

Part IV:

Study a [Coca-Cola advertisement from 1940](#) and a [7-Up advertisement from 1954](#).

- Who do you see in the first advertisement?
- What does the picture in the first advertisement suggest about the relationship between parents and children?
- Who do you see in the second advertisement? Who is no longer in the picture? What does this suggest to you about changes in family life in the 1950s?
- In the first advertisement, whom is Coca-Cola trying to convince to buy its product?
- Who is 7-Up trying to convince to buy its product in the second advertisement?
- Why do you think the advertisers changed their focus in this way between 1940 and 1954?

Part V:

Study the advertisements for radios from 1938 and 1959.

- What is the first advertisement trying to get consumers to buy? Who is most likely going to make the decision about whether to buy it?
- What is the second advertisement trying to get consumers to buy? Who is most likely going to make the decision about whether to buy it?
- Look at the radio in the first advertisement. In what room in the house would it have likely been? Who do you think would have decided what programs to listen to?
- Look at the radio in the second advertisement. How is it different from the radio in the first ad? Where would someone be most likely to use it? Who would have decided what to play on it?
- What conclusions can you draw about how the relationship between teens and their parents changed from the 1930s to the 1950s?
- What conclusions can you draw about how teenagers might have influenced the kinds of music that was played on the radio in 1959?

Part VI:

Read [Handout 2](#): an excerpt from the *Life* magazine article, "A New, \$10 Billion Power: The U.S. Teen-age Consumer," published Aug. 31, 1959.

Study a [photograph from the *Life* magazine](#) article illustrating the kinds of goods teens purchased in the 1950s on the board.

- According to the article, how much money did teenagers spend in a year in 1959?
- General Motors was the largest car manufacturer in the world at the time the article was written. How does the article say teen spending compared to the total sales of GM cars?
- Based on the article, what kinds of things were teens buying in this era? Would you characterize these things as necessities or luxuries?
- Out of that total spending, how much was spent specifically on entertainment? On records?
- If you were a record company executive in 1959, how would this information influence the kinds of artists you signed contracts with and the kinds of songs you asked them to record?