A BRIEF HISTORY OF POP AND ROCK MUSIC FROM THE 60’S TO THE 90’S

INTRODUCTION

Music is an essential part of Western culture. The need and appreciation for music is evident in the everyday lives of people for it is heard in movies, on television and throughout all forms of audio media. The majority of people also choose to listen to music for pleasure so it is not surprising, considering the bombardment of music one is faced with, that music can be an instrument of social influence and change. Music is a powerful form of communication. It can be personal, political, opportunistic, and can be self-expressive with therapeutic effects due to the release of emotion.

Pop music is an important part of British culture, not just as an expression of Englishness, but as an indicator of the multi-cultural nature of Britain today.

The Roots of Rock 'n' Roll

Rock ’n Roll began in the 1950s. The new music used fast dance rhythms and gritty instrumental sounds guitar. The 1950s saw most of the world that had access to records listening to American artists. In the early years the ballads and novelty numbers from the main US recording companies dominated and Britain was reduced to copying – at times note for note and phrase for phrase – the American original. The first big Rock ’n Roll hit was ‘Crazy, Man Crazy’ by Billy Haley and the Comets in 1953.

Rock ’n Roll was a marriage between a variant of black Blues music, Rhythm ’n blues and white American folk or Country music. It also took in elements of Gospel music and Western swing. Rock ’n Roll typically used the basic Blues chord sequence.

Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly and Chuck Berry were the biggest stars of 1950’s Rock and Roll. The tempo was around 120 BPM, much faster than the blues. This music was for dancing to.

Rock ’n Roll bands frequently used the electric guitar, a new instrument in the 1950’s, together with the piano, string bass and drums.
### 1960’s popular music

Many new and different styles of popular music developed during the 1960s, in the aftermath of Rock ‘n Roll. For example:

- **Motown**: a group of black singers and songwriters on the Motown record label (from MotorTown, Detroit). This was a type of soul music, lyrical and tuneful, using ‘horn’ sections (trumpets, trombones and saxophones) as well as the bass guitar which was now used in all popular music. Examples are Smokey Robinson and Diana Ross.

- **Soul**: based on the Atlantic coast of the US, soul music was also lyrical but somewhat more aggressive than Motown. Examples are Wilson Picket and James Brown.

- **Protest music**: the Cold War, the Vietnam war, and unrest over black civil rights gave rise to this type of angry folk song usually sung by a soloist with guitar accompaniment. One example would be Bob Dylan.

- **British music**: Though most countries soon developed their own rock traditions, it was the United Kingdom that evolved its own distinctive scene, making American traditions into distinctively British ones adding influences from English, Scottish and Irish folk music. By the middle of the 1960s, British artists had grown so adept at British-style rock, R&B and blues that the British Invasion occurred, led by The Beatles, The Who, The Rolling Stones, The Animals and The Kinks among others. At the end of the 60’s David Bowie mixed theatrical performance with his music to create a style known as Glam Rock. Glam rock was a highly theatrical style developed in the 1970s by David Bowie. The songs were short with catchy hooks and melodies and an emphasis on a rock’n roll sound.

### The instruments of pop

**Electric guitar.** Developed by Les Paul and first popularised by the American Fender company. Could be either loud and aggressive (eg Jimmy Hendrix) or subdued and lyrical (much of The Beatles). Often there were two: the rhythm guitar playing rhythmic chords together with the drum kit, and the lead guitar playing solos.

**Keyboards.** Many bands used Hammond organs or electric pianos because they were easily transported while on tour.

**Drum kit.** Provided the all-important beat. Main components are the bass drum, the snare drum and the hi-hat (two cymbals on a stand that can be operated by foot pedal).

**Strings.** Beginning with The Beatles, some bands began to use violins, violas and cellos to add depth and colour to the sound.

### Music recording:

Recorded music became in many ways more important than live music during the 60’s. The Beatles experimented with recording techniques to reverse, speed up, slow down and add electronic effects.
Pop music from the 1970’s onwards

The last 30 years of the 20th Century threw up numerous distinctive new styles of pop music - you’ll find examples of at least some of them in your parents' record collections!

1970s Punk, Progressive Rock and Heavy Metal

In the 1970s, the United Kingdom saw intense diversification in both popular and folk music. Rock, pioneered in Britain by The Rolling Stones, grew from the UK Rhythm and Blues scene of the 1960s. It featured heavy rhythms, often distorted guitars and a fairly fast speed. Led Zeppelin, The Doors, Deep Purple and Black Sabbath produced heavier versions paving the way for Heavy Metal. Heavy metal evolved from pioneers bands like those mentioned before into the hard-edged, complex music of bands like Iron maiden.

Progressive rock grew extremely popular, with ever-increasingly "progressive" elements added in the form of obtuse lyrics, classical-tinged music and long-playing suites in multiple parts. Pink Floyd, Queen, and Genesis are notable examples of this movement.

The reaction against progressive rock was swift, as the genre came to be perceived as needlessly obscure and inaccessible; a new generation of British youth hated progressive rock and the bombastic, indulgent sounds of heavy metal, disco and glam. They were called punks, and their music was loud, angry, rebellious punk rock. Punk became well-known after the coming of the Sex Pistols and their anarchistic, incendiary lyrics which attacked the pillars of British society, such as the monarchy. In its purest form, however, it was short-lived; the energy could not be sustained, especially after anti-pop bands like The Clash found mainstream success and became unwilling pop stars.

Despite the great decrease in size and popularity, there is still a small punk scene in the UK, and the genre has had a big impact across the musical spectrum. New York punk was represented by Blondie, The Ramones and Talking Heads. Recent years have seen a revival of American punk with bands such as Blink 182 and Green Day.

Disco and Funk

Disco: the most popular dance style of the 1970's, disco developed from the Motown sound. Good examples are: Musique, Chic, The Village People and Donna Summer. Disco was at its peak on the release of the film Saturday Night Fever whose soundtrack featured The Bee Gees. steadFast bass drum beats were a feature of disco music. Disco is still very popular and can be heard in many night clubs around the world.

Funk: often associated with Disco, Funk music featured Horn (brass) sections, syncopated rhythms and vocal group harmonies. Earth Wind and Fire, Oddysey, Parliament and The Brothers Johnson were some bands playing in this style.
Reggae

Reggae began in 1968 with the release of 'Do the Reaggay' by Toots and the Maytals. Later Bob Marley took the 'Ska' music of the shantytowns in Kingston, Jamaica, slowed the tempo and introduced a much heavier bass whilst retaining the strong upbeat, his name became synonymous with Reggae.

Heavy Metal and 1980s Rock

Heavy Metal was highly amplified form of electronic rock with a hard beat, distorted guitar and frequent long instrumental solos. Bands such as Motorhead, AC/DC, Whitesnake and many others played in this style. Thrash metal and Death Metal take this music even further, with a harder and faster playing style. Metallica is an example.

1980s Rock was a development of 1970s rock music with elaborate guitar solos and a heavy beat. Examples are U2, The Police, Dire Straits, Bryan Adams, Bruce Springsteen and Guns’ n Roses. One of the best guitar solo players is Mark Knopfler.

Rap. 1980s onward

Rap uses the spoken word as a rhythmic instrument. Rap DJs often use scratching and back spinning on vinyl discs to create the sound style for the vocalist to rap over.

Its roots are in the toasting of Jamaican DJs who spoke over rhythm and blues records, and in New York black street culture - where it went together with graffiti art, Hip-Hop and Break Dancing

It was often a highly political style whose lyrics could include very controversial statements. Public Enemy rapped about black social issues, making political statements about black rights, racism and police brutality.

Techno and House. Mid 1980s onward

Techno was a specific form of dance music - influenced by both Disco music and Dub - developed by DJs in the dance clubs of Detroit. It featured samples or cuts from tracks, loops and digital effects produced on synthesisers and computers - together with driving, repetitive drum-and-bass lines.

House music (named from the Warehouse club in Chicago) was developed by DJs out of Disco and Dub in the early 1980s. UK House hits of the late 1980s included 'Love Can't Turn Around' and 'Jack Your Body'. Records like this made stars of the DJs and engineers who produced and played the music.
A later spin-off was Acid House, which featured a wobbly baseline and trance-like sound and was very influential in the UK Rave scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

**1990’s popular music**

**Grunge.**

Grunge was a hard-sounding rock-based music pioneered by American bands mostly based in Seattle in the north-west United States: Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, Mudhoney, former metal-rocker Soundgarden, and Temple of the Dog.

Grunge was a reaction against American soft rock by a disillusioned and bored ‘Generation X’. Its lyrics often dealt with difficult issues such as drugs and mental illness. When Nirvana's front-man Kurt Cobain committed suicide in 1994 he was quickly elevated to cult status.

**Brit pop**

Brit Pop arrived in the early 1990s in part as a reaction to the dominance of American Grunge bands. It was usually guitar-and-drum based rock, sometimes with orchestral backing. Though varying in musical style, bands such as Blur, Oasis and Pulp were all labelled Brit Pop.

Brit Pop is an eclectic sound drawing on many musical styles of the previous 40 years - especially the music of The Beatles, Mod bands of the 60s like The Who, Rocker bands like The Rolling Stones, and Punk bands like The Sex Pistols. As with The Stones and The Beatles, some Brit Pop bands achieved success in America and emerged as ‘superstars’.

**Boy/Girl bands. 1990s onward**

These are highly 'produced' bands carefully designed to appeal to a specific, usually young-teenage audience. Sometimes they are actually put together to a formula by music producers (something first done with The Monkees as early as the 1960s).

Examples from the 1990s include Take That, The Spice Girls and Boyzone