

SECTION 3

Popular Culture of the 1950s

Guide to Reading

Main Idea

During the carefree and prosperous 1950s, Americans turned to television, new forms of music, cinema, and literature to entertain themselves.

Key Terms and Names

Ed Sullivan, Alan Freed, Elvis Presley, generation gap, Jack Kerouac, Little Richard

Reading Strategy

Categorizing As you read about the popular culture of the 1950s, complete a graphic organizer similar to the one below comparing new forms of mass media during the 1950s.

New Forms of Mass Media	Description

Reading Objectives

- **Explain** the characteristics of the new youth culture.
- **Discuss** the contributions of African Americans to 1950s culture.

Section Theme

Culture and Traditions The 1950s added such elements as rock 'n' roll music and sitcom television to modern culture.

Preview of Events



★ An American Story ★

In 1953 Lucille Ball and her real-life husband, Desi Arnaz, were starring in one of the most popular shows on American television, *I Love Lucy*. In January, Ball had a baby—both in real life and on her show. Her pregnancy and the birth of her baby became a national event that captivated her audience. A pre-filmed segment of the show showed Lucy and her husband going to the hospital to have the baby, and the show was broadcast only a few hours after the real birth. More than two-thirds of the nation's television sets tuned in, an audience of around 44 million viewers. Far fewer people watched the next day when television broadcast a presidential inauguration.

I Love Lucy was so popular that some people actually set up their work schedules around the show. Marshall Field's, which had previously held sales on the same night the show was on, eventually switched its sales to a different night. A sign on its shop window explained, "We love Lucy too, so we're closing on Monday nights." A relatively new medium, television had swept the nation by the mid-1950s.

—adapted from *Watching TV: Four Decades of American Television*

The New Mass Media

Although regular television broadcasts had begun in the early 1940s, there were few stations, and sets were expensive. By the end of the 1950s, however, the small, black-and-white-screened sets sat in living rooms across the country. Television's popularity



Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz



forced the other forms of mass media—namely motion pictures and radio—to innovate in order to keep their audiences.

The Rise of Television Popularity During World War II, televisions became more affordable for consumers. In 1946 it is estimated there were between 7,000 and 8,000 sets in the entire United States. By 1957 there were 40 million television sets in use. Over 80 percent of families had televisions.

By the late 1950s, television news had become an important vehicle for information. Television advertising spawned a growing market for many new products. Advertising, after all, provided television with the money that allowed it to flourish. As one critic concluded, “Programs on television are simply a device to keep the advertisements and commercials from bumping loudly together.” Televised athletic events gradually made professional and college sports one of the most prominent sources of entertainment.

Comedy, Action, and Games Early television programs fell into several main categories including comedy, action and adventure, and variety-style entertainment. Laughter proved popular in other formats

besides the half-hour situation comedy. Many of the early television comedy shows, such as those starring Bob Hope and Jack Benny, were adapted from popular old radio shows. Benny enjoyed considerable television success with his routines of bad violin playing and stingy behavior.

Television watchers in the 1950s also relished action shows. Westerns such as *Hopalong Cassidy*, *The Lone Ranger*, and *Gunsmoke* grew quickly in popularity. Viewers also enjoyed police programs such as *Dragnet*, a hugely successful show featuring Joe Friday and his partner hunting down a new criminal each week.

Variety shows such as **Ed Sullivan’s** *Toast of the Town* provided a mix of comedy, opera, popular song, dance, acrobatics, and juggling. Quiz shows attracted large audiences, too, after the 1955 debut of *The \$64,000 Question*. In this show and its many imitators, two contestants tried to answer questions from separate glass-encased booths. The questions, stored between shows in a bank vault, arrived at the studio at airtime in the hands of a stern-faced bank executive flanked by two armed guards. The contestants competed head-to-head, with the winner returning the following week to face a new challenger.

TV Nation

Television programming depicted a narrow view of American culture in the 1950s. Most television shows during these years centered around a common image of American life—an image that was predominantly white, middle-class, and suburban, epitomized by the popular situation comedy *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. Such shows also reinforced traditional gender roles, showing fathers working and mothers staying home to raise children and take care of the house.

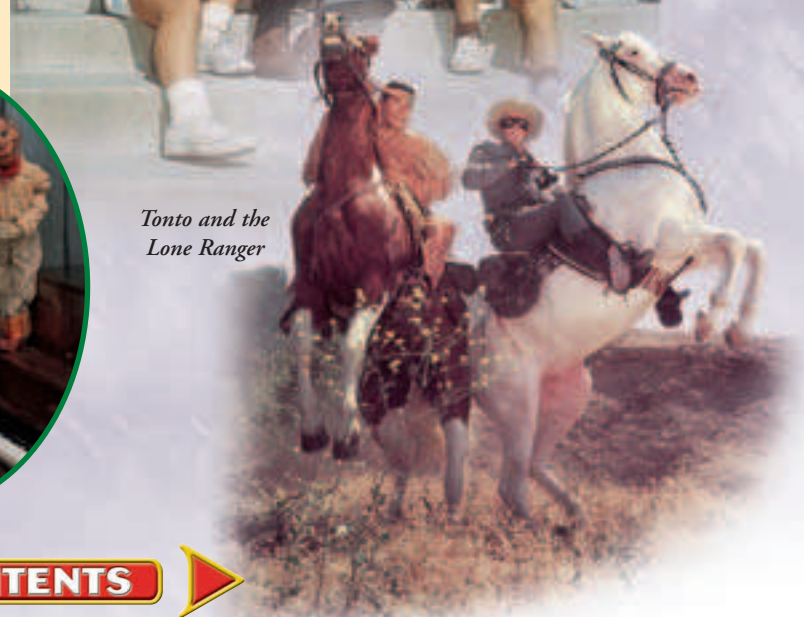
Westerns were also popular at the time, especially *The Lone Ranger*, in which a mysterious masked man helped people in distress. *The Howdy Doody Show*, which featured Buffalo Bob and his freckle-faced marionette, was the first network kids’ show to run five days a week, the first television show ever broadcast in color, and the first show ever to air more than 1,000 continuous episodes.



Ozzie and Harriet



Howdy Doody



Tonto and the Lone Ranger

**Fact**

Fiction

Folklore

Quick and Easy Eats Along with the television came . . . TV dinners! Capitalizing on the television boom of the 1950s, these frozen individual meals offered an entrée, a side dish or two, and a dessert, all on an aluminum tray divided into compartments.

Not everyone actually ate TV dinners in front of the television, but the meals were popular because they offered convenience. Noted one food industry executive of the time, “When Mary Smith rushes home from work late in the afternoon, she wants to buy food that not only will look pretty on the table but is something she can get ready in the half hour before her husband comes home for dinner.”



In 1956 the quiz show *Twenty-One* caused an uproar across the nation after **Charles Van Doren**, a young assistant professor with a modest income, won \$129,000 during his weeks on the program. The viewing public soon learned, however, that Van Doren and many of the other contestants had received the answers to the questions in advance. Before a congressional committee in 1959, Van Doren admitted his role in the scandal and apologized to his many fans, saying, “I was involved, deeply involved, in a deception.” In the wake of the *Twenty-One* fraud, many quiz shows went off the air.

Hollywood Adapts to the Times As the popularity of television grew, movies lost viewers. “Hollywood’s like Egypt,” lamented producer David Selznick in 1951. “Full of crumbling pyramids.” While the film business may not have been collapsing, it certainly did suffer after the war. Attendance dropped from 82 million in 1946 to 36 million by 1950. By 1960, when some 50 million Americans owned a television, one-fifth of the nation’s movie theaters had closed.

Throughout the decade, Hollywood struggled mightily to recapture its audience. “Don’t be a ‘Living Room Captive,’” one industry ad pleaded. “Step out and see a great movie!” When contests, door prizes, and an advertising campaign announcing that “Movies Are Better Than Ever” failed to lure people out of their homes, Hollywood began to try to make films more exciting. Between 1952 and 1954, audiences of 3-D films received special

glasses that gave the impression that a monster or a knife was lunging directly at them from off the screen. Viewers, however, soon tired of both the glasses and the often ridiculous plots of 3-D movies.

Cinemascope, movies shown on large, panoramic screens, finally gave Hollywood a reliable lure. Wide-screen spectacles like *The Robe*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *Around the World in 80 Days* cost a great deal of money to produce. These blockbusters, however, made up for their cost by attracting huge audiences and netting large profits. The movie industry also made progress by taking the “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” approach. Hollywood eventually began to film programs especially for television and also sold old movies, which could be rebroadcast cheaply, to the networks.

Like television, the films of the fifties for the most part adhered to the conformity of the times. Roles for single women who did not want families were few and far between. For example, each of Marilyn Monroe’s film roles featured the blond movie star as married, soon to be married, or unhappy that she was not married.

Movies with African Americans routinely portrayed them in stereotypical roles, such as maids, servants, or sidekicks for white heroes. Even when African Americans took leading roles, they were often one-dimensional characters who rarely showed human emotions or characteristics. African American actor Sidney Poitier resented having to play such parts:

“The black characters usually come out on the screen as saints, as the other-cheek-turners, as people who are not really people: who are so nice and good. . . . As a matter of fact, I’m just dying to play villains.”

—quoted in *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*

Radio Draws Them In Television also lured away radio listeners and forced the radio industry, like Hollywood, to develop new ways to win back audiences. After television took over many of radio’s concepts of comedies, dramas, and soap operas, for example, many radio stations began to specialize in presenting recorded music, news, talk shows, weather, public-service programming, and shows for specific audiences.

As a result of this targeted programming, radio stations survived and even flourished. Their numbers more than doubled between 1948, when 1,680



stations were broadcasting to the nation, and 1957, when more than 3,600 stations filled the airwaves.

✓ Reading Check Identifying How did the television industry affect the U.S. economy?

The New Youth Culture

While Americans of all ages embraced the new mass media, some of the nation's youth rebelled against such a message. During the 1950s, a number of young Americans turned their backs on the conformist ideals adult society promoted. Although these youths were a small minority, their actions brought them widespread attention. In general, these young people longed for greater excitement and freedom, and they found an outlet for such feelings of restlessness in new and controversial styles of music and literature.

Rock 'n' Roll In the early 1950s, rock 'n' roll emerged as the distinctive music of the new generation. In 1951 at a record store in downtown Cleveland,

Ohio, radio disc jockey **Alan Freed** noticed white teenagers buying African American rhythm and blues records and dancing to the music in the store. A week later, Freed won permission from his station manager to play the music on the air. Just as the disc jockey had suspected, the listeners went crazy for it. Soon, white artists began making music that stemmed from these African American rhythms and sounds, and a new form of music, **rock 'n' roll**, had been born.

With a loud and heavy beat that made it ideal for dancing along with lyrics about romance, cars, and other themes that spoke to young people, rock 'n' roll grew wildly popular among the nation's teens. Before long boys and girls around the country were rushing out to buy the latest hits from such artists as Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, and Bill Haley and the Comets. In 1956 teenagers found their first rock 'n' roll hero in **Elvis Presley**. Presley, who had been born in rural Mississippi and grown up poor in Memphis, Tennessee, eventually claimed the title of "King of Rock 'n' Roll."

While in high school, Presley had learned to play guitar and sing by imitating the rhythm and blues



**NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC**

**MOMENT
in HISTORY**

THE KING OF ROCK

Elvis Presley, shown here signing autographs after a performance in Houston, took American youth in the 1950s by storm. Parents, on the other hand, were less than thrilled with his music—a blend of African American-inspired rhythm and blues and early rock 'n' roll—and his hip-swiveling gyrations on stage. For Presley's first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, the host insisted that cameras show him only from the waist up. Elvis added to his fame by starring in a string of films that audiences loved but critics panned.





Jack Kerouac

music he heard on the radio. By 1956 Elvis had a record deal with RCA Victor, a movie contract, and public appearances on several television shows. At first the popular television variety show host Ed Sullivan refused to invite Presley on, insisting that the rock 'n' roll music was not fit for a family-oriented show. When a competing show featuring Presley upset his own high ratings, however, Sullivan relented. He ended up paying Presley \$50,000 per performance for three appearances, more than triple the amount he had paid any other performer.

The dark-haired and handsome Presley owed his wild popularity as much to his moves as to his music. During his performances he would gyrate his hips and dance in other suggestive ways that shocked many in the audience. Presley himself admitted the importance of this part of his act:

“I’m not kidding myself. My voice alone is just an ordinary voice. What people come to see is how I use it. If I stand still while I’m singing, I’m dead, man. I might as well go back to driving a truck.”

—quoted in *God’s Country: America in the Fifties*

Not surprisingly, parents—many of whom listened to Frank Sinatra and other more mellow and mainstream artists—condemned rock 'n' roll as loud, mindless, and dangerous. The city council of San Antonio, Texas, actually banned rock 'n' roll from the jukeboxes at public swimming pools. The music, the council declared, “attracted undesirable elements given to practicing their gyrations in abbreviated bathing suits.” A minister in Boston complained that “rock and roll inflames and excites youth.”

The rock 'n' roll hits that teens bought in record numbers united them in a world their parents did not share. Thus in the 1950s rock 'n' roll helped to create what became known as the **generation gap**, or the cultural separation between children and their parents.

The Beat Movement If rock 'n' roll helped to create a generation gap, a group of mostly white artists who called themselves the **beats** highlighted a values gap in the 1950s United States. The term *beat* may have come from the feeling among group members of being “beaten down” by American culture, or from jazz musicians who would say, “I’m beat right down to my socks.”

The beats sought to live unconventional lives as fugitives from a culture they despised. Beat poets, writers, and artists harshly criticized what they considered the sterility and conformity of American life, the meaninglessness of American politics, and the emptiness of popular culture.

In 1956, 29-year-old beat poet **Allen Ginsberg** published a long poem called “Howl,” which blasted modern American life. Another beat member, **Jack Kerouac**, published *On the Road* in 1957. Although Kerouac’s book about his freewheeling adventures with a car thief and con artist shocked some readers, the book went on to become a classic in modern American literature.

Reading Check Summarizing How did rock 'n' roll help create the generation gap?

African American Entertainers

While artists such as Jack Kerouac rejected American culture, African American entertainers struggled to find acceptance in a country that often treated them as second-class citizens. With a few notable exceptions, television tended to shut out African Americans. In 1956, NBC gave a popular African American singer named Nat King Cole his own 15-minute musical variety show. In 1958, after 64 episodes, NBC canceled the show after failing to secure a national sponsor for a show hosted by an African American.

African American rock 'n' roll singers had more luck gaining acceptance. The talented African American singers and groups who recorded hit songs in the fifties included **Chuck Berry**, **Ray Charles**, **Little Richard**, and the **Drifters**. The latter years of the 1950s also saw the rise of several African American women’s groups, including the



Little Richard



Fats Domino

Picturing History

African American Entertainers Rhythm and blues music provided the roots of the 1950s rock 'n' roll sound. *Did African American rock 'n' roll artists experience the same acceptance as artists like Elvis Presley? Why or why not?*

Crystals, the Chiffons, the Shirelles, and the Ronettes. With their catchy, popular sound, these groups became the musical ancestors of the famous late 1960s groups Martha and the Vandellas and the Supremes.

Over time, the music of the early rock 'n' roll artists had a profound influence on music throughout the world. Little Richard and Chuck Berry, for example, provided inspiration for the Beatles, whose music swept Britain and the world in the 1960s. Elvis's

music transformed generations of rock 'n' roll bands that were to follow him and other pioneers of rock.

Despite the innovations in music and the economic boom of the 1950s, not all Americans were part of the affluent society. For much of the country's minorities and rural poor, the American dream remained well out of reach.

Reading Check **Evaluating** What impact did American rock 'n' roll artists have on the rest of the world?

SECTION 3 ASSESSMENT

Checking for Understanding

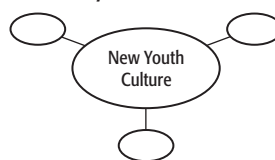
1. **Define:** *generation gap.*
2. **Identify:** Ed Sullivan, Alan Freed, Elvis Presley, Jack Kerouac, Little Richard.
3. **Explain** what happened to motion pictures and radio when television became popular.

Reviewing Themes

4. **Culture and Traditions** What roles did African Americans play in television and rock 'n' roll?

Critical Thinking

5. **Comparing** How did the themes of television shows of the 1950s differ from the themes of the literature of the beat movement?
6. **Organizing** Use a graphic organizer similar to the one below to list the styles of music and literature that made up the new youth culture of the 1950s.



Analyzing Visuals

7. **Analyzing Photographs** Study the photographs on pages 820 and 821. Many people have criticized these television programs for presenting a one-sided view of American life. Do you agree with this criticism? Why or why not?

Writing About History

8. **Expository Writing** Imagine you are a beat writer in the 1950s. Explain to your readers how the themes you write about are universal themes that could apply to everyone.