
Music in History

By D. H. Coop

I remember my first years in school with finger painting, drawing and music. The class would listen and sing songs together, playing with blocks wrapped in sandpaper and striking triangles and other instruments to accompany our songs. My teachers exposed us to classical music with the *Surprise Symphony*, explaining the story behind it. Then around third grade, the art and music stopped, the students with the best voices joined choir, and those interested in art took art classes. What I liked about the art and music were the stories behind their creation.

Later as I became an adult, I started to notice that some of the songs I sang in school were tunes that were reworked. In the 1960s, my uncle could not believe what they had done to “I’m Going to Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter” from the 1930s. Some of the rewrites were unknown to my generation, such as “A Paper of Pins” from the colonial days that was redone as “The Bus Stop Song” and “Mockingbird,” about the price of love. Then with rock ‘n’ roll came the civil rights movement.

Music before rock ‘n’ roll fell into groups. At the top was popular music and classical that was mainstream. All other ethnic music was called race music. Elvis changed the music world in the 1950s. Yet he was not the first. Back in the 1840s, Louis Moreau Gottschalk introduced a sound that mixed European and African slave sounds from the parks of New Orleans. “Le Banjo” is Gottschalk’s attempt to make the piano sound like the banjo, an instrument developed by slaves. That sound can be found in Scott Joplin’s “The Entertainer,” which seems to be a favorite melody of ice cream trucks. Joplin’s sound became known as ragtime, and it turned into jazz, which spread out of the South into cities in the North after the Great War.

Aaron Copeland took the sound and introduced it into classical and big bands, which turned it into swing. After World War II, big bands fell out of popularity. Bill Haley and the Comets hit the stage with “Rock Around the Clock,” which brings us back to Elvis the King.

Elvis is not the one I want to use to demonstrate the value of music in history, although he played a major role. Instead, I want to mention Johnny Cash and his influence on country music. Country music groups before Cash did not include a drum player. Cash’s songs all sounded the same to me. Then I learned the stories behind some of his songs. “I Walk the Line” introduced the drum into country music. He made the drum sound by placing a piece of sandpaper under the strings of his guitar. Then with “Ring of Fire,” he introduced the Mexican trumpet into country music.

Rock ‘n’ roll went on to play a very important part in the civil rights movement and the Cold War. Rock ‘n’ roll went to the Soviet Union, where individuals cut tracks on x-ray plates to copy songs of the Beatles and others from the West. Then during the protests in the 1990s in China, Cui Jian sang “Yi Wu Suoyou” (“Nothing to My Name”) in rock ‘n’ roll. In this country, Billy Joel’s “Allentown” as well as his “We Didn’t Start the Fire” is an indictment against the Greatest Generation for broken promises.

So the next time you hear a song, it may not be just a tune and words. It may be social change, protest, a story, just entertainment or part of the historical picture.