



Race, Rock, and Elvis (Music in American Life)

By Michael T. Bertrand

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In "Race, Rock, and Elvis", Michael T. Bertrand contends that popular music, specifically Elvis's brand of rock 'n' roll, helped revise racial attitudes after World War II. Observing that youthful fans of rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, and other black-inspired music seemed more inclined than their segregationist elders to ignore the color line, Bertrand links popular music with a more general relaxation, led by white youths, of the historical denigration of blacks in the South. The tradition of southern racism, successfully communicated to previous generations, failed for the first time when confronted with the demand for rock 'n' roll by a new, national, commercialized youth culture. In a narrative peppered with the colorful observations of ordinary southerners, Bertrand argues that appreciating black music made possible a new recognition of blacks as fellow human beings. Bertrand documents black enthusiasm for Elvis and cites the racially mixed audiences that flocked to the new music at a time when adults expected separate performances for black and white audiences. He describes the critical role of radio and recordings in blurring the color line and notes that these media made black culture available to appreciative whites on an unprecedented scale. He also shows how music was used to define and express the values of a southern working-class youth culture in transition, as young whites, many of them trying to orient themselves in an unfamiliar urban setting, embraced black music and culture as a means of identifying themselves. By adding rock 'n' roll to the mix of factors that fed into civil rights advances in the South, "Race, Rock, and Elvis" shows how the music, with its rituals and vehicles, symbolized the vast potential for racial accord inherent in postwar society.

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Editorial Review

Review

"It was teenagers who bought Elvis Presley's records, in enormous numbers. And Michael T. Bertrand's convincingly argues that the black-and-white character of the sound, as well as Elvis's own persona, helped to relax the rigid color line and thereby fed the fires of the civil rights movement... A sobering lesson for historians who scoff at popular culture (and the oral testimony that peppers the book) as trivia for the tenured." -- Karal Ann Marling, *American Historical Review* "Bertrand has managed to argue more cogently and with more evidential authority than any previous commentator that the music that Elvis Presley and his rockabilly cousins fashioned in the South in the 1950s represented a serious threat to various national and regional social conventions, particularly those relating to race, class, and gender." -- Brian Ward, *The Journal of American History* "Meticulous research and elegant, concise prose... Bertrand has written an insightful book that both deepens our understanding of rock 'n' roll and makes significant contributions to musical studies, Southern history, and the history of the civil rights movement... Would make an excellent book for adoption in undergraduate and graduate history courses, as its provocative arguments and fascinating anecdotes are sure to spark lively classroom discussions." -- Patrick Huber, *History* "Thoroughly readable and redemptive... The story of American music is, after all, as complex as the story of the country itself, and yet Bertrand covers most bases with impressive ease. His major contribution, however, is a measured assessment of how rock 'n' roll ... really did change the seemingly unchangeable place of its birth." -- John Kelly, *The Irish Times* "Extremely insightful... Illuminates social and cultural change that traditional political and economic focused studies ignore." -- Dexter L. Blackman, *H-South, H-Net Reviews* "A fascinating read... Packed with information." -- Maurice Bottomley, *PopMatters.com* "A wonderful mix of critical theory ... and traditional historical research... Bertrand's model also effectively documents one of the processes by which cultural identity is formed through popular culture. This book is for those teachers who think the music their students listen to is 'just noise.'" -- *Multicultural Review* "[Bertrand's] arguments are always persuasive and his lines of reasoning clear... The book is cleanly written, well annotated and involving... A thoroughly absorbing piece of work." -- Keith Briggs, *Blues and Rhythm ADVANCE PRAISE* "An ambitious exploration of the relationship between cultural and political change in the South in the crucial years after World War II. This book will encourage everyone to rethink the role played by rock 'n' roll in American life." -- Bill Malone, author of *Country Music, U.S.A.* "Michael Bertrand aims to prove that rock 'n' roll contributed to the success of the civil rights movement by breaking down the generational transmission of traditional southern attitudes toward race. Indeed, as he argues, the attraction for young white southerners of rhythm & blues initially and rock 'n' roll eventually had enormous cultural and political consequences." -- James M. Salem, author of *The Late Great Johnny Ace and the Transition from R&B to Rock 'n' Roll*

From the Inside Flap

In *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, Michael T. Bertrand contends that popular music, specifically Elvis Presley's brand of rock 'n' roll, helped revise racial attitudes after World War II. Observing that youthful fans of rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, and other black-inspired music seemed more inclined than their segregationist elders to ignore the color line, Bertrand links popular music with a more general relaxation, led by white youths, of the historical denigration of blacks in the South. The tradition of southern racism, successfully communicated to previous generations, failed for the first time when confronted with the demand for rock 'n' roll by a new, national, commercialized youth culture.

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About the Author

Michael T. Bertrand, a visiting assistant professor of American history and southern studies at the University of Mississippi, has written on Elvis Presley, Hank Williams, and rockabilly for the *Encyclopedia of Tennessee History and Culture*.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jordan Sampson:

The book *Race, Rock, and Elvis (Music in American Life)* can give more knowledge and also the precise product information about everything you want. Why then must we leave a very important thing like a book *Race, Rock, and Elvis (Music in American Life)*? Wide variety you have a different opinion about reserve. But one aim that book can give many data for us. It is absolutely proper. Right now, try to closer together with your book. Knowledge or facts that you take for that, it is possible to give for each other; it is possible to share all of these. Book *Race, Rock, and Elvis (Music in American Life)* has simple shape however, you know: it has great and large function for you. You can look the enormous world by wide open and read a publication. So it is very wonderful.

Ashley Downs:

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Vincent Newton:

In this era which is the greater man or woman or who has ability to do something more are more valuable

than other. Do you want to become one of it? It is just simple solution to have that. What you need to do is just spending your time little but quite enough to get a look at some books. One of several books in the top listing in your reading list is definitely Race, Rock, and Elvis (Music in American Life). This book that is qualified as The Hungry Hills can get you closer in turning into precious person. By looking right up and review this publication you can get many advantages.

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