
INTRODUCTION

Rock on Record is meant to enhance what is already a pleasurable experience: listening to music. Listening, of course, is its own reward. There is no requirement beyond letting the music into your ears. You don't need to know who's singing, who's in the band, who wrote the song, or who produced the record. You don't need to dance, and you certainly don't need to analyze the music. But if you pause for a while amid your million-song playlist and spend some time with a single track, allowing yourself the luxury of paying close attention, you may find a new level of enjoyment.

ROCK?

The term “rock” is pretty vague. It can mean a genre, as in rock vs. pop vs. R&B. But if Run-DMC can proclaim themselves kings of rock, the word clearly has other connotations. I use it here as a catchall to represent popular music (represented by another catchall: pop music) since World War II. What all of this music has in common is its birthplace: the recording studio. Records of earlier eras were meant literally to record a musical event in order to render it as accurately as possible. The goal was to make listeners feel they were in the presence of live musicians. But in the postwar years, even before there was a hint of rock and roll, record making became more like movie making. Records were intended to be not mere representations of real-world performances but listening experiences—sonic worlds—unto themselves. The tracks covered here, from rockabilly to disco, are all creations of the recording studio.

HISTORY

Rock on Record is not primarily a history book, but all the tracks are situated in a historical context and the book is organized according to a chronology of genre. Whenever we hear music, we put it into a context informed by our listening experience. Consciously or not, we hear records in relation to other records. Most pop music fans have a general awareness of genre, which is defined by the collection of stylistic features

that certain bands and records have in common. Our awareness of genre leads us to instinctively recognize a surprise if we hear an ABBA record with a death metal arrangement or a hardcore punk record with vocals by Celine Dion.

Rock music developed as a series of genres, each unprecedented. Yes, all had precursors. But there was no doo wop, or rockabilly, or surf, or psychedelic, or folk rock until there was. And once a genre came into being, it never went away. Fashions wax and wane, but every genre represented in this book is still with us today. Genres continue to evolve. They are bent and blended according to artists' whims. Exploring the origins of rock's principal formative genres can give us a fuller appreciation not only of music past but also of music today.

Rock is a democratic musical idiom. It developed in a commercial marketplace where audience opinions helped shape the landscape. The music covered in this book emerged as a haphazard cultural collaboration between artists and audience. No master plan produced rock and roll. Hit records—the ones that got the most “votes” at record stores and in juke boxes—pointed the way forward. In presenting this particular set of genres and artists, I have followed the map left by history. Selecting specific tracks within genres, however, has been more subjective on my part. Any number of tracks might be substituted. My goal is to present a collection of tracks sufficiently diverse that they represent a wide range of aesthetic and practical approaches to making records.

THEORY

Whenever someone says, “Talking about music is like dancing about architecture,” they seem to mean it pejoratively. I don't know why. Dancing about architecture shows imagination. And every music lover talks about music, sometimes a lot. But it is difficult to describe music's sound and sensory effect with precision using only adjectives. That's where theory and detailed analytic description come in. Music theory—which for records encompasses principles of sound engineering—gives us tools to better apprehend, understand, and communicate what the music makes us feel.

The first chapter of *Rock on Record* is devoted to some basic theory concepts and language, but those concepts are not intended for abstract speculation. They will be put to practical use. They will help make track descriptions more precise and streamlined. In guiding listeners through the tracks, some technical language will actually simplify the process.

THE GUIDES

How should you use the listening guides? First, just listen. Familiarize your ears with the track, and then read the description. It will highlight key elements of the track's character, but the explanation will need sonic illustration. Use the guide's time markers to locate the specific moments referred to in the track description and familiarize your ear with that sound or concept. Get to know the track in detail. Its words and melody are easily apprehended and can serve as a map. Listen to how the words and melody articulate the narrative structure, the form. Is there a chorus that repeats periodically? Is there a bridge that takes the music momentarily in a different direction? Is there a refrain that recurs through the track?

Listen to the arrangement of the instruments. What sounds do you hear? What "color" are they? Are they bright? Dull? Mellow? Strident? Do they stand out or blend together? Listen to the mix. Are the instruments balanced? Are some more prominent than others? Is the range of frequencies balanced? Or are some mixes heavy in the low-end (the bass), while others favor the high-end for a brighter overall sound? If the track is stereo, where in the stereo field are the sounds located? Do they move around?

Listen to the groove. A track's rhythmic character accounts for much of its feel. Listen to the words. They tell some sort of story, but they are also sounds in themselves. Sometimes their "song sense" may sound like nonsense in a more literal context. But songs change the function of words and can change their meaning as well. Listen to the voice. It is the focal point for most records. What sort of character does it portray? What is its emotional tone?

Once you have absorbed the details, follow the guide as the track plays through, like a musical score. It will remind you of the things you've been studying and thinking about. Finally, put the guide away and just listen. Listen closely, but go with the music's flow. You'll find that you are more attuned to what the track offers. The recorded musical image is dynamic and ever fluid. The sensory experience, even for a relatively simple track, is complex when heard in full. When we really *listen* to records, our ears take in a web of sound made up of words, voices, melody, rhythm, harmony, timbre, reverb (space), and myriad effects of electronic processing all unfolding interactively. It's a lot. It requires skill. Crossing the perceptive threshold from hearing to listening demands that we pay attention. Take some time to do that. The effort will easily pay for itself.

The numbers in parentheses in the listening guides refer to numbers of bars. The chart numbers are all *Billboard* charts. The changing names

reflect the magazine's different chart terminology over time, but all refer to retail sales. These are the ones referred to here.

Pop Charts	R&B Charts	Country Charts
Popular Records: Best Sellers in Stores Hot 100 Top LP's Top Pop Albums Billboard 200 (album)	Best Selling Retail Race Records R&B Records: Best Sellers in Stores Hot R&B Sides Hot R&B Singles Hot R&B LP's Top Selling R&B Singles Top Selling R&B LP's Best Selling Soul Singles Best Selling Soul LP's Hot Soul Singles Soul LP's Hot Rap Songs Top R&B Albums	Country and Western (C&W) Territorial Best Sellers, Memphis C&W Best Sellers in Stores