

**THE HISTORY CHANNEL® PRESENTS:  
10 DAYS THAT UNEXPECTEDLY CHANGED AMERICA™**



***When America Was Rocked***  
**(SEPTEMBER 9, 1956)**

Generations who had lived through The Depression and WWII craved stability, security, and safety in the 1950s. Meanwhile, younger generations were looking for fun and were more accepting and desirous of change. Rock'n'roll entered pop culture, and Elvis became a huge success. By his dress, performing style, and sound, Presley crossed the deep racial divide that segregated American music. His appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1956, was like throwing a hand grenade in America's cultural living room. The electrifying performance signaled the beginning of a shift in popular culture that would profoundly influence American attitudes about race, entertainment, fashion and music for decades to come. *When America Was Rocked* captures the drama and movement of this period through fascinating archival footage and interviews with historians presented against the colorful backdrop of the images and sounds which energized a generation and transformed U.S. society. Educators and their students will be pulled into this exciting and fast-paced investigation of American popular culture at a critical turning point. It is an excellent introduction to the cultural and social landscape of the United States in the post-World War II era.

**Curriculum Links:**

*When America Was Rocked* would be useful for U.S. History, Social Studies, and Music Courses. It is appropriate for senior high school viewers. Most of the documentary is also appropriate for junior high school, but teenage sexual behavior is mentioned. There is no

explicit or vulgar content, however. It is an ideal vehicle for a team teaching unit on the 1950's, combining a music class and a history class. It fulfills the following standards as outlined by the National Council for History Education: Civilization, Cultural Diffusion and Innovation and Patterns of Social and Political Interaction.

**Key Terms:**

Students should identify the following terms. Visit [www.mirriamwebster](http://www.mirriamwebster) for definitions.

*Brown v. Board of Education*

Cold War

Generational divide

Gospel Music

Homogeneous

Ideology

Integration

Juvenile delinquency

Segregation

Taboo

Tipping point

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Where is Memphis located? In the 1950's, what social and cultural factors existed in Memphis that did not exist in, for example, Omaha, Nebraska?
2. According to one historian, the "official ideology" of the United States was that it was a "happy, homogeneous nation" in 1954. What does that statement mean? What visuals are used in the documentary to support that interpretation?
3. What was happening in the United States and the world during the 1950's to create an "age of anxiety"?
4. Why did young white people often attend Black churches in Memphis? What is gospel music? How is it related to the "Blues" and "Rhythm and Blues" music?
5. How were issues of race and music woven together in America in the 1950's? Why were so many white adults worried about their children listening to Black artists like Chuck Berry and B.B. King?
6. Who was Sam Phillips? Why was Phillips important in the history of civil rights?
7. The Supreme Court decision known as *Brown versus Board of Education*, which banned legal segregation of schools, occurred more or less simultaneously as the appearance of Elvis Presley as a rock'n'roll star. How did Presley's dress, performing style, and music upset the status quo? How was he linked to integration by his critics?
8. In your opinion, do you think most of Presley's fans saw him as a symbol of integration and social change? Why or why not?
9. What is juvenile delinquency? Were critics of rock 'n'roll concerned about delinquency of African American youths or just white youths? Why?
10. Why were some adults convinced that rock'n'roll would lead to the decline of America's youth? What did they try to do to control rock music? Do you think

people can be successful in censoring music? In your answer, consider long and short term success possibilities.

11 . How and why did teenagers become an important consumer group in the 1950's? Are they still an important consumer group?

12. Describe the response to Presley on television. Who was Ed Sullivan? Why is his television program important in this documentary?

13. Until September, 1956, when Presley appeared on the Ed Sullivan show, television was a conservative cultural force. What type of cultural force is television today? Explain your answer.

14. Would you consider Elvis' appearance on the Ed Sullivan show to be a "turning point" in American history? Why or why not?

### **Primary Source Exploration:**

The following is an excerpt from Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren's opinion in the *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision, in which he outlined the findings of the court on the issue of racial segregation. After reading this excerpt, ask students to consider the questions below.

#### ***Brown v. Board of Education, Excerpt (1954)***

"Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms."

1. What is the basic argument Judge Warren makes in the paragraph above? Do you agree with his views on education? How does his statement pertain to racial segregation?
2. How do you think American race relations and rock 'n' roll music were intertwined? What influence do you think the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision had on the United States more broadly?

### **Extended Activities:**

1. BLUES BIOGRAPHY (Individual or group project): Choose one of the following artists and research his or her life and times: Sam Cooke, B.B. King, W.C. Handy, the Drifters, Thelonious Monk, Muddy Waters, Leadbelly, Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, Robert Johnson. Display your findings in a scrap book or on a poster board. Indicate important civil rights dates and other national events along with personal achievements and chronological milestones of your chosen artist.

- Providing a sampling of his or her music would be a nice addition. Present your report to your class.
2. **BUSINESS AND SOCIETY:** Examine the relationship between the music industry and social change. You may look at Memphis radio stations that introduced “race” music to white audiences, study the history of Sun Records, or the contemporary response to Presley appearing on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Some topics to consider are: segregation in Memphis, the impact of music on social change, the role of teenagers in pop culture, the changing nature of race relations in the 1950’s. You may use PowerPoint or an overhead projector to present your findings.
  
  3. **MUSICAL HISTORY OF ROCK ‘n’ ROLL:** Where did rock’n’roll come from? Presley sang music inspired by gospel, blues, jazz, and country and western. Create a recording for your class that provides samples of these different genres in American history, and end with some samples of Presley’s early music. Provide “liner notes” to accompany your recording, including artist credits, song title, and dates of performance, and an analysis of the influence of each genre on the development of early rock’n’roll and its chronological story.

### **Resources:**

#### **Books**

- Altschuler, Glenn C. *All Shook Up: How Rock ‘n’ Roll Changed America*, (Oxford, 2004).  
Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963*, (Simon & Schuster, 1989).  
Guralnick, Peter. *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley*, (Back Bay Books, 1995).  
Kallen, Stuart A., Ed. *1950s*, (Thomson Gale, 2000).

#### **Websites**

Helpful history and background information on Elvis’ life and significance:

<http://www.elvis.com/elvisology/>

Background and recordings from the Smithsonian:

<http://www.folkways.si.edu/index.html>

Helpful background on the Civil Rights Movement and Brown v. Board of Education:

<http://www.historychannel.com/classroom/brownvboard/>