

# Popular Culture

## BEFORE YOU READ

In the last section, you read about the American dream in the 1950s.

In this section, you will read that popular culture in the 1950s reflected white, middle-class America, and a subculture challenged that conformity.

## AS YOU READ

Fill in the chart with notes on what each group contributed to popular culture in the 1950s.

### TERMS AND NAMES

- mass media** Means of communication that reach large audiences
- Federal Communications Commission (FCC)** Government agency that regulates the communications industry
- beat movement** Writers who made fun of the conformity and materialism of mainstream American society
- rock 'n' roll** Form of popular music, characterized by heavy rhythms and simple melodies, that developed from rhythm and blues in the 1950s
- jazz** A style of music characterized by improvisation

GROUP	CONTRIBUTION TO POPULAR CULTURE OF THE 1950s
Families shown on TV	
Beat generation	
Rock 'n' roll	
African Americans	

## New Era of Mass Media

(pages 652–655)

### What influence did TV have?

**Mass media**—the means of communication that reach large audiences—include radio, television, newspapers, and magazines. Television became the most important means of communication in the 1950s. It both showed and influenced popular culture of the time.

The number of homes with television jumped. It went from 9 percent of all homes in 1950 to 90 percent in 1960. At first, the number of television

stations was limited by the **Federal Communications Commission (FCC)**. The FCC is the government agency that regulates the communications industry. Soon, however, TV stations spread across the country. Many shows became widely popular all over the nation.

The 1950s were the “golden age of television.” Comedy shows starring Milton Berle and Lucille Ball were popular. Edward R. Murrow introduced on-the-scene reporting and interviews. There were also westerns, sports events, and original dramas. At first, all shows were broadcast live.

Advertisers took advantage of this new medium, especially of its children's shows. Young fans wanted to buy everything that was advertised on their favorite shows. TV magazines and TV dinners—frozen meals to heat and eat—became popular.

Television reflected the mainstream values of white suburban America. These values were secure jobs, material success, well-behaved children, and conformity. Critics objected to the *stereotypes* of women and minorities. Women were shown as happy, ideal mothers. African Americans and Latinos hardly appeared at all. In short, TV showed an idealized white America. It ignored poverty, diversity, and problems such as racism.

As dramas and comedies moved to TV, radio changed. It began to focus on news, weather, music, and local issues. The radio industry did well. Advertising increased and so did the number of stations.

The movie industry suffered from competition by television. The number of moviegoers dropped 50 percent. But Hollywood fought back. It responded by using color, stereophonic sound, and the wide screen to create spectacular movies.

1. Was the picture of America portrayed on television accurate?

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## A Subculture Emerges (page 655)

### *What was the beat movement and rock 'n' roll?*

Television showed the suburban way of life. But two *subcultures* presented other points of view. One was the **beat movement** in literature. These writers made fun of the conformity and materialism of *mainstream* American society.

Their followers were called beatniks. They rebelled against consumerism and the suburban lifestyle. They did not hold steady jobs and lived inexpensively. They read their poetry in coffee houses. Their art and poetry had a free, open form. Major works of the beat generation include Allen Ginsberg's long poem *Howl*, Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind*.

2. How did the beat movement criticize mainstream culture?

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## African Americans and Rock 'n' Roll (pages 655–657)

### *What role did African-American artists play in the 1950s?*

Some musicians also took a new direction. They added electronic instruments to the African-American music called rhythm and blues. The result was **rock 'n' roll**. The new music had a strong beat. Its lyrics focused on the interests of teenagers, including *alienation* and unhappiness in love. And teenagers responded. They bought millions of records. The biggest star of all—the King of Rock 'n' Roll—was Elvis Presley. He had 45 songs that sold more than one million copies.

Some adults criticized rock 'n' roll. They said it would lead to teenage crime and immorality. But television and radio helped bring rock 'n' roll into the mainstream.

Many of the great performers of the 1950s were African American. Nat "King" Cole, Lena Horne, Harry Belafonte, and Sidney Poitier were popular with white audiences. They led the way for later African-American stars. **Jazz** musicians like Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie also entertained audiences of both races. The most popular black performers were the early rock 'n' roll stars, like Little Richard and Chuck Berry.

Television was slow to integrate. One of the first programs to do so was Dick Clark's popular rock 'n' roll show *American Bandstand*. In 1957, *Bandstand* showed both black couples and white couples on the dance floor.

Before integration reached radio audiences, there were stations that aimed specifically at African-American listeners. They played the popular black artists of the day. They also served advertisers who wanted to reach black audiences.

3. How did African Americans influence the entertainment industry of the 1950s?