

# APOLLO

## EDUCATION

THE APOLLO THEATER STUDY GUIDE

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# RHYTHM & BLUES



# ROOTS OF RHYTHM & BLUES

During the 1930s and 40s, **swing** was the most popular music in America. The **big bands** of artists like Lionel Hampton and Cab Calloway delighted audiences with their high energy performances. Following World War II (1939-45), many of the big bands broke up into smaller groups, and the **Swing Era** came to a close. In swing's place, a new popular music emerged, called **Rhythm & Blues**.

Before Billboard Magazine first coined the term "Rhythm & Blues" in 1949, or "R&B" for short, record companies labeled numerous styles of music created by African Americans, "race music." While "race records" were marketed primarily to African American audiences, R&B helped break down categories of race by introducing music created by black performers to white audiences on a massive scale.

Similar to the big bands of the Swing Era, though smaller in size, R&B bands featured piano, upright bass, drums, horns, and increasingly by the 1950s, electric guitar. While many big band musicians went on

to explore new artistic possibilities for jazz in the 1940s, particularly with a fast-paced instrumental style of jazz called **bebop**, R&B music invited audiences to dance and sing along.

Early R&B pioneers like Louis Jordan blended the **syncopation** of swing with the hard driving feel of **jump blues** to create R&B's infectious rhythmic groove. When **blues shouters** like Big Joe Turner and Wynonie Harris got a hold of that groove, listeners had never heard music with such raw emotion. Audiences were especially drawn to the vocal qualities of R&B, which encouraged musical **call and response** and featured humorous song lyrics.

In order to meet the growing demand for R&B music, dozens of record companies sprung up throughout the United States in the 1940s and 50s, leading to a surge in R&B record sales and radio play. Nowhere did these developments become more public, and was R&B more popularly received, than at the World Famous Apollo Theater in Harlem, New York.

R&B artists blended the blues, jazz, and gospel music to create their unique sound. What are some examples of artists today who have blended different musical styles to create their own unique sounds? What musical styles do they draw from?



# RHYTHM & BLUES AT THE APOLLO

Since The Apollo first opened in 1934, the theater has presented many different forms of arts and entertainment.

Comedians, tap dancers, and even animals performing tricks, were all popular in The Apollo's Vaudeville style variety acts of the 1930s and 40s. As a new generation of audiences took interest in R&B, the Apollo's variety acts were replaced by the "R&B Revue" in 1955.

With popular **disc jockey**, Tommy "Dr. Jive" Smalls, promoting the revues on his "Dr. Jive" radio program, audiences flocked to The Apollo to see as many as a dozen R&B acts appear on the same bill. The revues were so well received a made-for-television movie was filmed to offer home audiences a glimpse into what a "Rhythm & Blues Revue" looked like.

For viewers to see black musicians playing black music on television was groundbreaking for the time; television still being a new form of technology in the 1950s. The Apollo's "R&B Revue" was the first performance format of its kind and inspired similar formats with theaters and radio stations around the country.



Like jazz in the 1920s and 30s, R&B invited a young generation of listeners to participate. R&B's infectious rhythmic groove inspired popular dances, while catchy song lyrics welcomed audiences to sing along. **Can you think of any artists or songs that have inspired popular dances?** What about songs that have a catchy hook which make you feel like singing along?

With 20<sup>th</sup> century advancements in technology, such as the radio and television, R&B had a platform to reach mass audiences and become popular. **How do you listen to (or watch) music today?** What new forms of technology have emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which have made that possible?



# A NATION OF RHYTHM & BLUES

While the Apollo helped popularize R&B more than any other performance venue in America, a national network of record companies and radio stations played a great role in the development of the music.

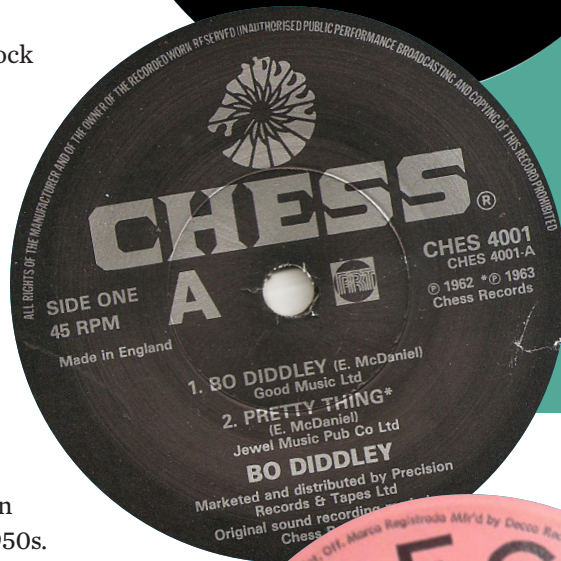
In New York City, major record companies like Decca produced some of the biggest R&B stars of the day, including Louis Jordan. Meanwhile, smaller independent companies like Atlantic produced influential R&B recordings by Big Joe Turner and Ruth Brown.

Other independent companies, such as Peacock Records in Houston, TX recorded Big Mama Thornton as well as the self-proclaimed “Originator of Rock and Roll”, Little Richard. In New Orleans, LA, Little Richard later recorded some of his biggest hits at J&M Studios, where pianist and vocalist Fats Domino recorded his own hit R&B records in the 1950s.

By the 1960s, Detroit, MI saw the birth of Motown Records and the “Motown Sound”; made famous by artists like Smokey Robinson and Marvin Gaye. Additional record companies including Chess (Chicago, IL), King (Cincinnati, OH), Specialty (Los Angeles, CA), and Stax (Memphis, TN), all contributed to the development of R&B, and produced artists who shaped the course of American music history.

HERE ARE JUST A FEW EXAMPLES OF FAMOUS RECORD COMPANIES THAT RECORDED R&B MUSIC AND SOME OF THE ARTISTS THEY REPRESENTED:

- DECCA (New York, NY)  
Louis Jordan
- ATLANTIC (New York, NY)  
Aretha Franklin and Ray Charles
- KING (Cincinnati, OH)  
James Brown & Famous Flames
- MOTOWN (Detroit, MI)  
Smokey Robinson and Marvin Gaye
- CHESS (Chicago, IL)  
Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry
- PEACOCK (Houston, TX) –  
Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton
- SPECIALTY (Los Angeles, CA) Little  
Richard and Sam Cooke
- STAX (Memphis, TN)  
Otis Redding



# ON THE RADIO



The explosion of R&B records in the 1940s and 50s helped popularize what was commonly referred to as “race music” in the United States. When Billboard Magazine formally replaced the term with “Rhythm & Blues” in 1949, African American artists became more widely recognized by white audiences, particularly on the radio.

Disc jockeys such as Alan Freed in Cleveland, OH (who first coined the phrase “rock and roll” in 1951) took notice of listeners’ growing interest in R&B in the early 1950s. On his late-night radio program, “[Moondog Rock’n’Roll Party](#)”, Freed introduced R&B to young white audiences; sparking a cultural revolution that brought matters of race

**ON HIS LATE-NIGHT RADIO PROGRAM, “MOONDOG ROCK’N’ROLL PARTY”, FREED INTRODUCED R&B TO YOUNG WHITE AUDIENCES; SPARKING A CULTURAL REVOLUTION THAT BROUGHT MATTERS OF RACE TO THE FOREFRONT OF MAINSTREAM AMERICA.**

to the forefront of mainstream America.

Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton’s hit record “[Hound Dog](#)” for example, sold over 500,000 copies following its 1953 release. Elvis Presley’s cover of Thornton’s “[Hound Dog](#)” on the other hand, sold over 10 million copies following its 1956 release, and became one of the most popular rock and roll records ever produced.

White artists were no doubt afforded opportunities black artists were not, reflecting African Americans’ struggle to win racial equality in America. R&B had a major impact on breaking down categories of race in music and popular culture, and planted the seeds for future social awareness in soul, funk, hip hop, and rap music.





# RACE IN RHYTHM & BLUES

**DID  
YOU KNOW?**

The Chitlin Circuit gets its name from chitterlings, a soul food dish made from the small intestines of a hog.



In reference to Rhythm & Blues, vocalist Ruth Brown once said, “The rhythm covered up the blues.” She was referring to racial inequality in both the music industry and life at large for African Americans in the United States.

While the practice of segregation separated American citizens based on race in the 1950s, African Americans worked tirelessly to fight such injustice. Significant civil rights events including activist Rosa Parks refusing to

give up her seat to a white man on a public bus in Montgomery, AL in 1955, brought matters of racial inequality to the forefront of American politics, and helped launch the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.

Meanwhile, African American artists like Ruth Brown came up playing on the *Chitlin’ Circuit*; a route of performance venues in the eastern United States where African Americans could safely perform and attend performances at. The most respected venue on the *Chitlin’ Circuit* was none other than the Apollo Theater in Harlem, which first desegregated performances in 1934, and has since become world famous for empowering African American artists.





# RHYTHM & BLUES THEN AND NOW



## THE PIONEERS

Saxophonist and vocalist Louis Jordan helped kick off the R&B movement in the mid-1940s with hits like “Let the Good Times Roll”. As the decade came to an end, **blues shouters** including Big Joe Turner and Wynonie Harris helped popularize R&B even more with their powerful voices and humorous song lyrics.

Vocal groups like The Orioles and Billy Ward and the Dominoes merged doo-wop singing and R&B. The Dominoes featured influential R&B vocalists Clyde McPhatter and Jackie Wilson. Along with artists like James Brown, Sam Cooke, and Aretha Franklin, Wilson blended R&B and gospel music to help create soul music in the 1960s.

Whether at The Apollo, or in theaters and recording studios around the country, R&B artists laid the foundation for the future development of rock and roll, soul music, and more.

## CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

Just as the term “race music” was applied to numerous styles of African American music during the 1930s and 40s, the term “R&B” was similarly applied to rock and roll artists in the 1950s, soul artists in the 1960s, and funk artists in the 1970s.

The label is still used by record companies today to describe African American artists and their music. “Contemporary R&B” artists like Mary J. Blige, Beyoncé, and Bruno Mars blend pop, funk, soul, and hip hop to create their original sounds; just as artists in the 1940s blended blues, jazz, and gospel music to create the original sound of “R&B.”

## THINK ABOUT IT:

Inequality can exist in many forms; from racial, to gender, to economic, and more. Can you think of any specific examples of inequality that exist in the world today? How can artists, activists, politicians, and citizens at large, work together to make sure everyone’s civil rights are protected in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Top to bottom: James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Louis Jordan, Mary J. Blige, Beyoncé



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# MUSICAL ELEMENTS OF RHYTHM & BLUES

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**Rhythm & Blues:** Developing out of the 1940s Swing Era, R&B became the predecessor for rock and roll to develop in the 1950s, as well as soul music in the 1960s.

**Swing:** A style of jazz popular in the 1930s and 40s.

**Swing Era:** An historical period (1935-45) when swing was the most popular music in America.

**Big Bands:** Large jazz ensembles often featuring five saxophones, four trombones, four trumpets, and a rhythm section of piano, upright bass, and drums.

**Syncopation:** Syncopation in American music developed out of West African and Caribbean dance rhythms, and became popular through jazz, R&B, and rock and roll in the 20th century.

**Bebop:** A fast-paced instrumental style of jazz which emerged in New York City in the early 1940s.

**Call and Response:** Similar to a conversation, musicians perform a “call” for an audience to “respond” to, with audiences either echoing the call or expanding on it. A fundamental element of African American music, call and response became significant to the stylistic development and popularity of R&B, rock and roll, soul, funk, hip hop, and rap music in the 20th century.

**Jump Blues:** An up-tempo style of blues featuring a hard driving rhythmic feel, musical call and response, and humorous song lyrics.

**Blues Shouters:** Powerful vocalists who can sing over a band without the need for amplification.

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**Written by**  
Tim Sullivan

**Apollo Theater Education Staff**  
Shirley C. Taylor  
*Director of Education*  
Debbie Ardemento  
*Associate Director of Education*  
Jason Steer  
*Education Manager*  
Princess Belton  
*Education Coordinator*  
Chinai Hardy  
*Education Associate*

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Page 7: top to bottom – James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Louis Jordan, Mary J. Blige, Beyoncé (Wikimedia)

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