

# Big Bands and Rock 'n Roll: Musical Generations in America

By Tom W. Smith

*"True music must repeat the thought and inspiration of the people and the time."*

George Gershwin

Musical tastes change with the times. New genres regularly appear, established styles decline in popularity, and some musical stalwarts undergo revivals. Whether an original form of music, a foreign import, or a second coming of an old style, "new" musical genres appeal disproportionately to the young. Each emerging generation is open to the popular music of its day and is drawn to music that defines itself as that generation's sound. As the generation ages, it tends to maintain its preference for the music of its youth over that of earlier and later times. Other genres may come and go, but at a minimum each generation favors the music that defined its youth.

Because music exerts a strong cohort effect, we can observe the changing musical tastes of America over the last 70 years by examining musical preferences across birth cohorts in the 1993 General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center.<sup>1</sup> Grouping people by decade of birth allows us to identify a particular cohort by the music that became its hallmark. The 15-year old Sinatra fan of 1940 represents the 1920s cohort; the 15-year old Elvis rocker of 1960—the early heyday of rock and roll—represents the 1940s cohort; and the 15-year old hip hopper of 1990 represents the 1970s cohort.

### Musical Preferences by Age

As Table 1 shows, most of the trends closely match the historical ebb and flow of musical tastes, and many show massive shifts in both absolute and relative musical popularity. Overall, there are three distinct trends. First, there are those genres that were most popular among the earliest cohorts, but then faded off. For example, the big band/swing music of the 1930s and 40s was strongly liked by 38% of the pre-1920 birth cohort, but favorable responses fell

off consistently, to only 4% strongly liking it among those born in 1970 and later. Second, there are those genres (contemporary rock, new age, rap, reggae, and heavy metal) that peaked in the most recent cohort but were rarely liked by the earliest cohorts. For example, contemporary rock is strongly liked by virtually no one in the pre-1920s cohort but favored by 29% of the 1970s group. Third, there are those genres (country, musicals, bluegrass, folk, gospel, mood, opera, Latin, oldies rock, blues, and jazz) that rose in popularity, peaked among one of the middle birth cohorts, and then declined among more recent groups. Oldies

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rock was strongly liked by only 4% of the pre-1920s birth cohort, rose to a top popularity of 37% among the 1940s group, and then fell to 24% among those born in the 1970s.

Shifts in preference across birth cohorts within rock genres can be shown even more clearly by a series of questions that Gallup asked in 1989. First, people were asked if they were current or former fans of rock and roll, or never had been fans. Consistent with the cohort pattern in Table 1, there are few fans (14%) of rock in the pre-1940 cohort, while substantial majorities of the 1940+ birth cohorts (71% for 1940-59

and 76% for 1960+) are current or former fans. For rock fans, birth cohort strongly influences what their favorite style of rock is. Among those born before 1950, 49% favored 1950s rock and only 8% preferred 1980s rock. Conversely, among those born in 1965 or later only 6% favored the rock of the 1950s and 47% preferred 1980s rock.<sup>2</sup> These patterns are the present-day echoes of changes in musical tastes over the last 70+ years.

This cohort signature allows us to peer back into the musical changes that have rippled through the century. But what is even more interesting is how past tastes endure. It is the persistence of historical patterns of popularity more than 50 years after a musical era peaks that is particularly noteworthy.

Looking at the relative position of each of the 18 musical genres, we see that the peak popularity of big band music occurred in the pre-1920s cohort; country, musicals, and bluegrass in the 1920s group; folk, gospel, mood/easy listening, opera, and classical in the 1930s group; Latin and oldies rock in the 1940s cohort; blues and jazz in the 1950s cohort; and rap, reggae, contemporary rock, new age/space, and heavy metal among those born in the 1970s. No musical style peaked in the 1960s cohort.

If we look at the top musical styles for each cohort, we see one notable consistency and one predominant shift (See Table 2). Country music has had relatively high popularity across all periods, ranking second or third in popularity for all birth cohorts. The one major shift is that prior to the 1940s cohort the top three styles are big band, gospel, and country. With the 1940s cohort rock moves to the top position and starting with the 1960s cohort rock dominates the first two positions. The shift from big band and gospel to rock and roll is

**Table 1**  
**Musical Preferences by Decade of Birth**

**Question:** ...Can you tell me which of the statements...comes closest to your feeling about each type of music?...Big band music...Do you like it very much, like it, have mixed feelings, dislike it, dislike it very much, or is this a type of music that you don't know much about?

(Those responding "like very much")

	Pre-1920	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s
<b>Big Band/Swing</b>	38%	36%	26%	14%	10%	7%	4%
<b>Bluegrass</b>	10	16	14	11	6	6	5
<b>Country/Western</b>	18	31	30	30	21	20	20
<b>Blues or Rhythm&amp;Blues</b>	9	12	11	13	17	13	14
<b>Musicals/Show Tunes</b>	18	25	20	22	9	6	10
<b>Classical</b>	17	18	21	18	17	13	14
<b>Folk</b>	11	11	11	11	8	3	3
<b>Gospel</b>	30	29	33	21	19	16	13
<b>Jazz</b>	10	10	15	16	21	16	12
<b>Latin/Mariachi/Salsa</b>	1	5	6	7	6	4	2
<b>Mood/Easy Listening</b>	13	20	21	17	14	11	9
<b>New Age/Space</b>	0	2	1	3	4	3	6
<b>Opera</b>	7	6	11	4	2	2	4
<b>Rap</b>	0	1	0	2	2	3	18
<b>Reggae</b>	1	1	*	2	5	9	20
<b>Contemporary Pop/Rock</b>	0	3	5	9	15	23	29
<b>Oldies Rock</b>	4	12	14	37	33	27	24
<b>Heavy Metal</b>	0	1	0	1	2	7	13

\* less than 0.5%

**Source:** Survey by the National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey (NORC-GSS), February 5-April 26, 1993.

shown by the shift from the 1930s group to the 1940s one. Across these adjoining cohorts strong liking for rock styles increased by 27 percentage points, while big band and gospel fell by 25 percentage points.

The cohort and generational patterns also show up clearly when the 18 musical styles are examined to see what styles of music cluster together (i.e., people tend to like all of the styles in the group). Five factors or musical clusters emerge and cohort is a prime force in shaping each. The first, haute and pop standards, includes musical styles that enjoyed their peak popularity prior to the 1940 cohort (classical, opera, musicals, folk, and big band). The second factor, new styles, contains all genres that peaked among the 1970s cohort (rap, heavy metal, new age, and reggae) except for contemporary rock which also loaded moderately strongly on this factor. The third factor, minority-oriented urban music, centers around jazz and blues with the

minority music styles of Latin and reggae also being related. The fourth factor, country, like haute and pop standards, also consists of styles that were most favored prior to the 1940s cohort (country, bluegrass, mood, and gospel). Last, rock 'n roll includes rock from the past (oldies—1940s cohort) and present (contemporary rock—1970s cohort). Also, the rock 'n roll factor is negatively related to gospel. People who like rock tend to dislike gospel.

In looking at these five factors we see that two generations play an especially important role in forming these groupings. Only the rock 'n roll factor includes musical styles from non-adjoining cohorts<sup>3</sup> and no factor includes styles that span the major generational shift before and after the 1940s birth cohort. Within musical generations sub-cultures based on region, ethnicity, and urban residence further differentiate groups. Among the pre-1940 musical styles, the haute and pop factor is upscale, cosmopoli-

tan, and urban while the country factor is down market, homespun, and rural.<sup>4</sup> For musical styles from the 1940s+ cohorts there are also two separate and long established groups—the urban, minority music of jazz, blues, and Latin and the dominant, mainstream rock and roll. Finally, there's a new style among the genres of the 1970s cohort that for now at least combines recent minority and majority off-shoots of rock.

This switch in musical generations is also revealed by changes in the number of styles of music people favor. Since we are using absolute ratings of music and not rankings, total popular preference can be measured by looking at how many musical styles people strongly like. On average the pre-1920s cohort strongly liked 1.85 genres. This then increased to 2.37 for the 1920s cohort and to 2.38 for the 1930s cohort before falling to 2.32 for the 1940s cohort, 2.08 for the 1950s, and 1.90 for the 1960s cohorts. Finally, total popular preference increased again to 2.18 for the 1970s co-

**Table 2**  
**Top Three Musical Styles by Decade of Birth**

	Pre-1920	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s
<b>Rank</b>							
<b>1st</b>	Big band	Big band	Gospel	Oldies	Oldies	Oldies	Contemp. Rock
<b>2nd</b>	Gospel	Country	Country	Country	Country	Contemp. Rock	Oldies
<b>3rd</b>	Country	Gospel	Big band	Musicals	Jazz	Country	Reggae/Country

Source: Survey by the NORC-GSS, February 5-April 26, 1993.

hort. Since total preference can be thought of as a measure of diversity in strong favorable response ratings, it indicates that musical tastes became less diverse after rock 'n roll emerged with the 1940s cohort and continued to expand its influence over the next two cohorts. Greater diversity was then re-established in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> This measure of top likes also suggests that musical tastes are divided into two major generational eras, one before and one after the 1940s cohort.

### Patterns of Change

The specific patterns of change for the 18 musical genres indicate how the cohort transitions come about. The basic pattern shows a sharp surge between two birth cohorts that indicates when the musical genre emerged and achieved its initial popularity. The music usually reaches peak popularity in the cohort following the surge. Popularity is either maintained for a few cohorts (a plateau effect) and then declines (e.g., the case of country, gospel, folk), or peaks and immediately begins to lose ground (e.g., bluegrass, oldies, jazz). Of the 17 musical genres showing significant variation in popularity, three (big band, gospel, and folk) developed too early in the century for us to catch their initial growth phase. For the 14 which we can follow, maximum surge occurred in 12 immediately preceding the music's high point of popularity. Only for jazz and contemporary rock is the initial surge followed by significant further growth, to a high point two or more cohorts later.<sup>6</sup>

The decline after the surge is typically less rapid than the rise. As noted above, several genres show plateau effects, and those that decrease from a peak usually have less steep declines than increases. This is probably because musical styles remain accessible (via music stores, con-

certs, and "period" radio stations) to subsequent generations.

### Familiarity with Musical Styles

Changes in musical awareness or familiarity show a pattern different from popularity. Awareness is measured by looking at the proportion of respondents who say a type of music is one that they "don't know much about" (See Table 3). There is less variation across cohorts for familiarity than for popularity. Awareness changes across cohorts significantly for only 12 of 18 musical styles, compared to 17 of 18 for popularity.

Knowledge or awareness of a musical style penetrates more widely and evenly throughout the population, while gains in popularity are heavily concentrated among the youth at the time a new genre appears on the music scene. In particular, awareness usually differs little between the birth cohort identified with the peaking of a new genre and the cohorts immediately preceding and following. As a result, neither the surges in popularity nor the more moderate declines following the peaks come from appreciable changes in awareness levels. While large surges and declines in popularity occur across cohorts immediately before and after the peak, awareness hardly changes at all (average changes of less than half a percentage point).

While awareness is not notably higher among the cohorts associated with the emergence of dominant new genres, and does not change much around the peaking of popularity or during initial surges and declines in popularity, it is often appreciably lower among birth cohorts most removed from the peak generation. In 16 of 18 music types, awareness is lowest among either the pre-1920s cohort or, at the other end, among the 1970s generation. On average, people

are unfamiliar with 1.2 styles of music, but the pre-1920s cohort is unfamiliar with 1.9 styles, the 1940s cohort with 0.85, and the 1970s cohort with 1.6.

Thus, unfamiliarity and popularity do not co-vary much among adjoining cohorts, but do at the extremes. For example, big band has its highest popularity (38%) and lowest unfamiliarity (2%) in the pre-1920s cohort and its lowest popularity (4%) and highest unawareness (26%) among the 1970s birth cohort. Similarly, reggae is highest in popularity (20%) and lowest in unawareness (6%) in the 1970s cohort; and is extremely low in popularity in all cohorts before the 1940s and highest in unfamiliarity (42%) in the pre-1920s cohort. Popularity and familiarity do not closely track one another, because the former is heavily determined by cohort, and awareness diffuses more widely and evenly.

### Perceptions Affected by Age Cohort

Much of our perspective on life is shaped by events occurring during our transition to adulthood, from the teens to the early twenties. As Mannheim theorized, political generations are formed by the prevailing events that individuals experience during the early stages of adulthood. Schuman and colleagues have shown that evaluations of what events and developments in recent American history have been most important and choices of historical analogies to characterize the Persian Gulf War are heavily influenced by one's birth cohort.<sup>7</sup> In particular, they showed that there have been two especially important and distinctive generations—the World War II and the Sixties generations. Musical tastes show the same general patterns of cohort changes and the same specific pattern of two dominant generations (big band and rock n' roll) as are indicated by the

**Table 3**  
**Familiarity with Different Types of Music by Decade of Birth**

**Question:** ...Can you tell me which of the statements...comes closest to your feeling about each type of music?...Big band music...Do you like it very much, like it, have mixed feelings, dislike it, dislike it very much, or is this a type of music that you don't know much about?

(Those responding "Don't know much about")

	Pre-1920	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s
<b>Big Band/Swing</b>	2%	5%	7%	7%	10%	17%	26%
<b>Bluegrass</b>	10	8	6	7	8	16	21
<b>Country/Western</b>	1	0	0	1	2	1	6
<b>Classical</b>	5	8	3	2	5	2	6
<b>Folk</b>	6	5	2	3	5	4	18
<b>Mood/Easy Listening</b>	11	7	2	3	2	5	9
<b>New Age/Space</b>	31	20	22	20	14	16	14
<b>Rap</b>	14	6	3	4	2	1	2
<b>Reggae</b>	42	39	29	16	12	6	6
<b>Contemporary Pop/Rock</b>	10	7	3	2	1	*	3
<b>Oldies Rock</b>	11	7	4	1	1	1	2
<b>Heavy Metal</b>	14	10	3	3	3	1	3

**Note:** Only those where a significant change has resulted are shown.

\* less than 0.5%

**Source:** Survey by the NORC-GSS, February 5-April 26, 1993.

perceptions and assessments of historic events. Our cohort experiences exert a continuing influence over many aspects of our lives, from how we view the world to the music we enjoy.

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> The GSS is an in-person, full-probability sample of the household population of the US. It had a response rate of 82.4% and its demographics closely match those of the Census and Current Population Surveys. For complete technical details see James A. Davis and Tom W. Smith, *General Social Surveys, 1972-1993: Cumulative Codebook* (Chicago: NORC, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> However, even the Gallup approach has some problems and may underestimate cohort effects regarding musical tastes. On the one hand, the references to rock music by decades may emphasize time periods too much. On the other

hand, they do not differentiate clearly between different styles such as doo-wop, the California sound, motown, acid, punk, new wave, grunge, etc., encompassed within one decade or spanning two decades. Favorability ratings of specific rock genres should capture cohort effects even more precisely and would presumably indicate that these effects were even greater than shown by the GSS or Gallup approaches. In addition, references to specific artists (and songs) that epitomized a style and period should further strengthen cohort effects.

<sup>3</sup> The rock cohorts of the 1940s and 1970s hold together in part because both oldies and contemporary rock are quite popular among the intervening 1960s generation.

<sup>4</sup> These depictions are re-enforced by analyses by race, education, church attendance, community type, and religion. Analysis not presented.

<sup>5</sup> But that may be an artifact of greater coverage of recent sub-genres of rock and roll (e.g. heavy metal and reggae) while other periods may not be so well covered. This certainly seems to be the case for the earliest period where styles such as barber shop quartets, rag time, and Dixieland may have been fairly popular.

<sup>6</sup> Jazz and contemporary rock may show this pattern because they do not distinguish between musical sub-genres (see above). The initial surge and subsequent rise may be capturing and combining distinctive styles from different periods.

<sup>7</sup> Howard Schuman and Cheryl Rieger, "Historical Analogies, Generational Effects, and Attitudes towards War," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 57, 1992, pp. 315-326; and Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott, "Generations and Collective Memories," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 54, 1989, pp 359-381.

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