DANCE FLOOR DEMOCRACY

American Bandstand and the Formation of a Youth Body Politic

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Submitted to Professor Andrew Friedman
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ABSTRACT

At the end of World War II America’s youth looked with palpable vigor toward the prospect of a peaceful and prosperous future. Buttressed by an air of cautious optimism, America’s young people seemed to embody a broader spirit of national renewal. It was in this context of abundance and forward-looking confidence that advertisers first used the term teenager to describe the nation’s youths. Through the concept of a teenager advertisers sought to isolate and pursue a group of young consumers made exponentially more powerful by the rising income of their parents.

And as the term began to circulate more commonly, Americans engaged in a cultural debate over what exactly the term meant. In this decisive historical moment I detect a major shift in how teenagers defined themselves. Intended as a way to describe the middle step between childhood and the domestic roles of homemaker or breadwinner, the teenager initially fit neatly into a postwar liberal consensus that held the nuclear family unit as its societal keystone. Despite these intentions, however, teenagers began to reformulate and subvert the term’s meaning. In the fifteen years after World War II, teenagers increasingly understood themselves and youth culture as something verifiably separate and outside the nuclear family unit.

I examine this shift in teenage identity by looking closely at the rock ‘n’ roll dance show American Bandstand, one of the most influential youth-oriented television programs in broadcasting history. The show first aired in 1952 on WFIL-TV, Philadelphia’s local ABC affiliate. Originally known simply as Bandstand, the local installment reinforced a nuclear notion of the teenager. Over time this notion evolved, and changes in the show’s format, presentation, and content reflected larger changes in
teenage culture. In 1957 the show entered national syndication, and in the following six years *American Bandstand* developed into a primary outlet for non-nuclear expressions of youth identity. Through *American Bandstand* I capture a generation pledging their allegiance to the age-restricted domain of adolescence. This generational sense of belonging dulled the prohibitions of an identity based on whiteness, or suburbanness or normative familial roles. This is not to say that the teenager eradicated any of the nefarious "isms" associated with such exclusionary identities, but it did necessarily expose the teenager to certain marginalized groups and lifestyles. It was through the identity of teenager that adolescents on *American Bandstand* listened to rock 'n' roll music or performed various suggestive dance moves. When young people entered the realm of teenager, they necessarily stepped outside the nuclear family unit and its postwar liberal consensus.

And what began as a cultural departure in the late 1950s grew increasingly political as the 1960s began. This union of age transformed into a feeling that the young people understood their world in ways that their adult counterparts did not, and that those same youth had a mission to parlay that vision into action. It was the beginnings of what I call the youth body politic and the teenager was its primary precondition. Before there could be a teenage body politic there had to exist some group that saw itself as separate and bounded by age and age only. As such, the story of *American Bandstand* is the prehistory of youth politicization.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first want to thank Professor Saler for finding something salvageable in those muddled first thoughts and Professor Lapsansky-Werner for providing a finishing flourish. As for the man in the middle, I am equally indebted to Professor Friedman for further refining my thinking and patiently sifting through reams of half-edited prose. Additional appreciation goes out to all those who guided me through the dizzying array of voices I encountered in the process of my research. In particular I want to thank James Gullick, Brenda Galloway-Wright at Temple University’s Urban Archives, and the staff of the Paley Center for Media in New York City. To those who shared their American Bandstand memories with me, thank you for living the history and being generous enough to pass your wisdom to tomorrow’s youth. And finally, thank you Mom, Dad and Hannah for the unending supply of love and support and for helping me survive my own adolescence.
INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1958, Philadelphia native Arlene Sullivan took a bus trip to New York City with some of her friends to see a live taping of a televised rock ‘n’ roll show. Those on the bus were all teenagers, somewhere between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, looking forward to a night of special performances from some of their favorite singers. When the bus pulled up to the theater, the one thousand or so youngsters waiting in line outside the television studio began to cheer wildly. But with no singers in sight, it quickly became apparent to Sullivan and her pals that the frenzied response was directed at their arrival. As they disembarked, the crowd’s reaction escalated to an almost frightening pitch. Sullivan recalls:

[The teenagers] were crazy. They were trying to go over the crowd to try and pick our clothes and they were grabbing my hair....the police had to do something.¹

Eventually law enforcement set up barricades to push the throngs back. Once authorities restored order, they provided each teenager with a security escort into the theater. One of Sullivan’s friends, fellow-teenager Joanne Montecarlo, described the scene as “very very scary, like Beatlemania.”² But this was six years before the Beatles touched down across town at John F. Kennedy International Airport, which begs the question: Who were these kids on the bus?

In one sense they were normal teenagers who, like many other people their age, enjoyed dancing and listening to rock ‘n’ roll music. But to the screaming fans these everyday adolescents were the cast of one of America’s most popular daytime television

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programs, a Philadelphia-based matinee called American Bandstand. And although it may seem strange, both descriptions of Sullivan and her friends relate closely to one another. They were stars because they were normal, a normality that they performed unwittingly on television. Everyday after class let out they traveled to a studio in West Philadelphia, spent ninety minutes dancing in front of the camera to the most popular songs of that week, and eventually returned home to do schoolwork and spend time with their families. So when young people cheered their arrival, or watched their every move on television, they celebrated themselves. They applauded a new self-awareness, a sense of belonging enabled by the age-restricted domain of the teenager. The kids on the bus were teenagers, just like those cheering beyond the barricades, and that shared generational identification formed a powerful link between those dancing on camera and those dancing at home.

This celebration of adolescence remains one of the most important legacies of American Bandstand, and yet the show has been effectively removed from the dual histories of rock ‘n’ roll and youth culture in the postwar period. In posterity it has become the poster child for a bland interregnum between the rock ‘n’ roll trailblazers of the early-to-mid 1950s and the revolutionary British invaders of the early 1960s. Historians remember the show as a mouthpiece for artificiality; a place where assembly-line teen idols like Bobby Rydell, Fabian, Frankie Avalon, and Annette Funicello could cultivate their cookie-cutter images. It is a period pejoratively referred to by rock historian Paul Friedlander as “the calm before the storm.”3 For those like Friedlander, this was a “period of transition” with artists that “though popular, left little legacy.”4

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4 Friedlander, 73.
And although almost all historians agree that the twenty years after 1945 changed youth culture in substantial ways, a critical majority sees this transformation of the American teenager as a byproduct of anti-authoritarian rebellion against the homogenous, suburban status quo of the 1950s. Bandstand, which purposefully projected itself as non-threatening, falls outside the historical consensus. As a result, shows like American Bandstand and other participants in rock ‘n’ roll’s “calm before the storm” become a necessary evil instead of a creative mechanism. In the study of postwar youth culture, the focus remains on the rebels, the supposedly more authentic outlets of a subterranean impulse to reject the norm.

And while both of these prevailing analyses divorce American Bandstand from the historical narrative, neither accounts for the show’s immense popularity. Every weekday afternoon twenty million viewers turned on their television sets, tuned in to their local ABC affiliates, and watched teenagers dance. It was a deceivingly simple formula, one that baffled industry insiders and television critics. Yet from its first moments of national syndication in 1957 until the arrival of the Beatles six years later, American Bandstand did not simply draw astronomical ratings; it became a pop culture phenomenon. At the show’s height it elicited 45,000 letters a week and achieved “net

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7 For an example of this see Leerom Medovoi, Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005).
9 For examples of such reactions to the show see Jackson, 52-53 and Shore, xvi.
ratings that equaled the combined ratings of the shows telecast by two rival networks."^{10}

Such an overwhelming response challenges the notion that rock 'n' roll took a break in the late 1950s and early 1960s, or that youth culture congealed around popular images of rebellion.

With respect to the show's success, a few scholars have made novel attempts to incorporate Bandstand into the narrative of postwar youth. The most affirmative histories of American Bandstand cast the show as a sort of generational teaching tool, a place where "young Americans learned to be teenagers."^{11} But even this explanation fundamentally misunderstands the show's role in the development of the teenager.

American Bandstand did not teach young people how to perform their newly discovered identity as teenagers, precisely because no such template existed. Rather, on American Bandstand young people actively negotiated and created the concept of the teenager as much as they engaged in learning or fulfilling that role. American Bandstand and shows like it were so popular because they capitalized on the teenage quest for self-definition and self-determination. Bandstand was an insider's-only club for adolescents, a place where teenagers began to think of themselves as wholly distinct. Teenage identity was not necessarily at odds with adult identity, but it was emphatically different. American Bandstand stressed difference without stressing rebellion, in the process creating a media phenomenon among the millions of teenagers craving a cultural nexus that they could call their own. This study uses American Bandstand as a lens for better understanding this complex development, a framework for parsing the internal mechanics of teenage

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^{11} Tim Wall, "Rocking Around the Clock: Teenage Dance Fads from 1955 to 1965," in Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A social and popular dance reader, ed. Julie Malnig (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 190. A similar sentiment can be found in Oakley, 281.
identity. The goal is not to cast *American Bandstand* as a paradigmatic moment in postwar youth history. Nor is this project aimed at providing a comprehensive overview of the show's televisual timeline. Instead this paper looks more closely at the years between 1952 and 1963, from *American Bandstand* 's beginnings to the height of its popular acclaim and cultural influence. In these years one can see, through the changes in the show, a critical transformation taking place in the concept and content of teenage identity.

When the show began as a local matinee on Philadelphia's WFIL-TV, it projected adolescence as a friendly corollary to the already-established notion of a nuclear family unit. It is important to note that the nuclear family in this context refers very specifically to a postwar notion of family that historian Elaine Tyler May calls the "ideal of the suburban home, complete with modern appliances and distinct gender roles for family members." In a period of economic abundance, the nuclear family captured the national imagination because its very existence relied on a postwar prosperity that rendered kinship networks obsolete and made the maintenance of an independent household "economically possible." Domesticity was the bedrock of the era's liberal consensus, a shared goal that encapsulated America's promise and potential. When the term teenager surfaced after World War II, it referenced a growing demographic still very much within the limitations of this familial ideal. Falling short of any cultural autonomy, adolescence existed as a more precise way of describing the transition between childhood to an

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eventual place as the patriarch or matriarch of a nuclear family. In its infancy *Bandstand* stuck very closely to this limited understanding of youth. By imagining teenagers as denizens of a restricted regional network under the controlled and adult-dominated domains of home and school, early *Bandstand* transmitted a notion of adolescence rooted in domesticity.

In the mid-to-late 1950s, however, *Bandstand* began to shed this nuclear optic. The show evolved in order to capture and convey a growing sense that America’s teenagers thought of themselves as quite distinct. Through its form and content the show started to imagine adolescents in the context of a national youth network. Contrary to regionalized notions of control, this emergent teenager inhabited a distinct cultural realm that no longer legitimized adult authority. *American Bandstand* provided the non-nuclear teenager with a virtual space, a forum where youth could engage in a trans-regional exchange. Through this forum one can also see a shift in agency or control over the content of teenage identity. Although the term teenager began as a top-down dictation from adults, a more self-referential understanding of youth culture emerged amongst teenagers during this period. Teenagers began setting their own parameters of inclusion and determining their own likes and dislikes. As former *Bandstand* dancer Bunny Gibson recalls, “There was no stopping us...the parents didn’t have a chance!”

And as youth opened themselves to the possibility of cultural autonomy, the category of teenager began to co-opt outsider inputs. Freed from the shackles of domesticity, young people used their identity as teenagers to explore the countersuburban lifestyles of those outside the mainstream. On *American Bandstand*, the emergence of

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SECTION I

Trapped In Pleasantville: 
Early Bandstand and the First Teenagers

Much like the nation at large, America’s youth appeared to be on the verge of a breakthrough at the end of the Second World War. Out of the shadows and privations of depression and war, American adolescents turned toward the tentative prospect of material pleasure and sustained peace with palpable vigor. As historian Jon Savage notes, the fate of the young seemed inextricably tied to the nascent potential of a world in the midst of rebirth. He writes, “The old world was dead and the best-placed group to flourish in the uncertain postwar era were the young—who had always been held to embody an auspicious future.”17 In the 1950s, public intellectuals defined this auspicious future in increasingly material terms. In 1954, historian David M. Potter said of American prosperity, “We are in a position to affirm to the world that...we are qualified to show other countries the path that may lead them to a plenty like our own.”18 As Potter’s comment suggests, the nation viewed its wealth as a uniquely American endowment that informed the country’s mission in the world. As a generation forged in the crucible of abundance, early permutations of youth culture evolved out of this exceptionalist notion.

Although embryonic notions of youth and youth culture had emerged over the past fifty years, adolescence did not become a publicly acknowledged demographic category until the postwar period.19 In 1944 that emergent group would acquire a

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18 Potter, 139.
distinctive label, teenager. At its inception, the term teenager circulated primarily amongst advertisers, and referred almost exclusively to a recently identified marketing niche. Due to the rising income of their parents, young people as a consumer group enjoyed purchasing power far beyond that of their forbearers. By the end of the 1940s American teenagers consumed, “90 million candy bars, 130 million soft drinks, 230 million sticks of gum, and 13 million ice cream bars a week.” But while the rates of consumption were undeniably staggering, the teenager’s role in society remained a matter of debate. Historian Grace Palladino argues that the popular image of the teenager during these early years represented more of an adult imposition on youth culture than a genuine expression of adolescent interests. According to Palladino, Seventeen magazine, one of the main purveyors of teen culture during the late 1940s and early 1950s, understood adolescents as “customers who intended to follow in their parents’ domestic footsteps.” As a result, early promoters of the teen market viewed their young consumers as members of the nuclear family, miniature adults whose tastes would conform to the standards of an older generation if given the appropriate commercial guidance.

Media played a crucial role in this top-down definition of youth culture. In response to the growth of the teenager as a purchasing category in the postwar years, various broadcast mediums began to grant youth programming greater financial resources and more airtime. According to Palladino, “Spending for juvenile radio shows had increased from $600,00 to $7 million between 1941 and 1951, and weekly shows like

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20 Savage, xv.
22 Ibid., xvii.
23 Palladino writes, “Envisioning the teenage market as an after-school extension of a home economics class, pioneer promoters took it for granted that adults could shape teenage tastes and steer young consumers along appropriate, wholesome paths — a theory known at the time as character building.” Ibid., xvi.
‘Teen Town,’ ‘Teen Timers Club’ and ‘Teenage Party,’ which were ‘beamed to the bobby soxers’ every Saturday morning, were becoming regular features.”

On the tails of this trend entered Bandstand, a youth-centered music and dancing television show first aired by Philadelphia’s WFIL-TV on October 7, 1952. Although television was not a new technology in 1952, Bandstand’s debut fell in the chronological epicenter of the medium’s early development. Between 1948 and 1955 television “became a dominant mass medium” for the first time. And in lock-step with the industry’s rise as a cultural circulator, television established itself as a prominent visual transmitter of youth culture.

The social content of the adolescent portrayed on most television programs, however, remained trapped inside the prevalent framework of domesticity. 1950s television shows catered to the nuclear family unit instead of a distinctive youth identity that lay outside of the domestic sphere. Early television operated as a mirror for the middle-class lifestyle, an inherently suburban technology that, down to the spatial demands of the set itself, fit the contours of the suburban home. Programming choices reflected television’s function within middle-class society. Historian Vincent Brook says, “During the mid-1950s, a paradigm shift occurred in American television....ethnic working-class comedies were overtaken by relentlessly white, middle-class, suburban sitcoms...” Although spending on youth programming increased during this period, adolescents generally appeared as mere extensions of their television families. As the early years of Bandstand reveal, adult marketers in the late 1940s and early 1950s

24 Ibid., 110.
25 Lynn Spigel, Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2. In fact, Spigel makes this period the focus of her study.
26 Medovoi, 98.
imagined adolescents as members of a subordinate subculture within the domain of home life. Much like the creators of Seventeen magazine, Bandstand's brain trust saw adolescents as “potential homemakers (and breadwinners)” rather than the denizens of a truly separate social sphere.28

Inside Men

Bandstand's architects, a creative team grounded in older media formats and cultural norms, predictably adhered to a domestic understanding of the postwar teenager. They were industry men of a different era, members of overlapping private clubs and inner-circles whose vision of youth culture referenced the conventional wisdom of the advertising community. WFIL-TV general manager Roger W. Clipp, for example, "received his baptism into the backroom world of broadcasting via a stint as an NBC accountant."29 After working at NBC for six years Clipp transferred to WFIL’s radio division in 1935, working as the station’s business manager. Clipp quickly maneuvered his way up the WFIL hierarchy, becoming general manager of WFIL Broadcasting Company in 1938, vice president and director in 1941, and finally president and director in 1944. When WFIL Broadcasting Company was sold to media tycoon Walter Annenberg’s Triangle Publication Inc. in 1946, Clipp wore yet another hat as general manager of WFIL’s radio and television operations.30

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28 Palladino, xvii.
29 Jackson, 7.
As a reward for his service, Clipp served as president of The Poor Richard Club, a well-known private society for advertising executives in the Philadelphia area.\textsuperscript{31} Founded in 1906, one of the club’s stated goals was to advocate “for the widening and amalgamation of advertising circles, bringing them into a closer and better understood relationship.”\textsuperscript{32} The male-only society endorsed a sense of industry-wide collaboration that erected an understood barrier between insiders and outsiders. The world of the Poor Richard Club was one of ladders, a series of entrenched hierarchies and seemingly nepotistic networks of patronage. Club historian Jack Lutz even referred the society’s foundation as a sort of birthing process with “so many fathers.”\textsuperscript{33} Lutz called a chapter on the club’s origins, “life begins,” repeatedly calling the club the “infant” or “baby.”\textsuperscript{34} The men of the Poor Richard Club understood themselves in this domestic sense, as the fathers of their trade. And when these wise men looked at teenagers they saw children on the way to adulthood, young people taking another step on the path toward predictable domesticity.

Like Clipp, WFIL-TV station manager George Koehler also belonged to insider societies such as the Poor Richard Club and the Variety Club. In fact, Koehler’s and Clipp’s career paths had such parallel arcs that Koehler eventually replaced Clipp as the head of Triangle Publishing’s Radio-TV division when Clipp reached the mandatory retiring age in 1968.\textsuperscript{35} Similarly, WFIL-TV program director Jack Steck worked his way into the same media-industry inner sanctums. He served as president of the Poor Richard

\begin{itemize}
  \item[32] Ibid., 4.
  \item[33] Ibid., 2.
  \item[34] Ibid., 1, 2, and 3 respectively.
\end{itemize}
Club, held the position of chairman of the board for the Charles Morris Price School of Advertising and Journalism, and earned a membership into the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. In 1974 the Delaware Valley chapter of the Broadcast Pioneers honored Steck as their “Person of the Year,” an award later won by George Koehler in 1977 and Roger Clipp in 1978.

Such biographical overlap is not merely coincidental, it symbolizes a connection in perspective shared by the men who first envisioned Bandstand. Clipp, Koehler and Steck represent entrenched members of the old guard, a composite historical portrait of the men who created the term “teenager” but knew little about youth culture outside of its marketing preferences.

The Kids Next Door

The original version of Bandstand reflected the industry-insider perspective of its creators, a show invented by men born on the other side of a crucial generational divide. The show understood its target audience as our kids, local schoolboys and schoolgirls attached to cultural norms that lay within the nuclear family structure. In particular, Bandstand wore its provinciality like a banner. The show stressed its Philadelphian roots and the kid-next-door quality of its young dancers. Bob Horn, Bandstand’s original host, often asked adolescent audience members to say which area high school they attended when performing an on-air interview. These sound bites became a staple of the show, a way of identifying the youngsters and placing them within a familiar local context. The

36 Jack Steck WFIL Staff Profile from Temple Urban Archives.
38 Jackson, 19
original Bandstand set promoted a similar theme. Pennants from area high schools adorned the walls, providing a colorful backdrop for Horn's podium and the dance floor itself.\textsuperscript{39} The banners became a symbolic link between the studio in West Philadelphia, and teenagers living in growing suburbs such as Bensalem, Bordentown, and Chichester. The banners reinforced a pre-existing local network and an understanding of the teenager linked to regional structures of control manifested in the public and parochial school systems.

Bandstand's regional identity also surfaced in early newspaper coverage of the show. An article by Rex Polier, the Philadelphia Bulletin's long-time television critic, reinforced this sentiment. Polier's article about the show's regular dancers, identifies where each young star lived in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. A typical photo caption reads: "HEP TO THE MAMBO. Gerald (Jerry) Blavat, 15 of 1906 S. Bancroft st., and Ada Padilla, of 1914 E. Passyunk av., show a few mambo steps to admiring fellow-fans during intermission."\textsuperscript{40} Connecting the dancers to recognizable local addresses drove home the show's block-party appeal and linked on-air personalities like Blavat to a boy-next-door prototype. Furthermore, pieces like Polier's, combined with the show's promotion of area high schools, connected youth culture to two bastions of adult authority: the home and the school. By doing so, the early Bandstand era imagined a notion of adolescence that existed within communal structures of control. Identifying specific neighborhoods and high schools was a particularly helpful tool toward this end because it tied viewers to familiar institutions and implicitly denied any connection.

\textsuperscript{39} For pictures of old set and high school pennants see Temple Urban Archives Picture collections under "Bandstand," and see newspaper photographs from Philadelphia Bulletin February 12, 1955 and Philadelphia Inquirer June 1, 1956.

\textsuperscript{40} Rex Polier, "Teen-Agers Outpull Name Guests on 'Bandstand,'" Philadelphia Bulletin, July 17, 1955.
between local teens and some sort of larger youth network. In the eyes of the show's creators and promoters, these regional bonds would ensure that local young people grew into the societal functions that their parents already performed. Perhaps the teenager was a new marketing category, but in social practice it merely represented a middle step on the well-trodden path toward nuclear domesticity and professional work life.

Like the set and the show format, the music featured during Bandstand's early years also reflected the expectations and assumptions of an older generation. More specifically, Bob Horn's Bandstand primarily played popular standards that enjoyed cross-generational appeal. According to Bandstand historian John Jackson, "The music...danced to during the show's early years was sung primarily by white pop singers, as was the case on most television and radio programs during this era." Bandstand might have targeted teenagers, but the playlists assumed that young people would adapt adult tastes as they matured. A sample Bandstand top-ten list from February of 1955 includes mainstream white pop singers like the McGuire Sisters, Perry Como, and Tony Bennett. These were songs of another era, sung by older artists, coming from more grown-up venues. As historian Alan Petigny points out, even the "teen idols" of the early 1950s were not exclusively marketed to young people. For example, the music of heartthrob Frank Sinatra "functioned within the parameters of respectable big band entertainment." As Petigny notes, "many of Sinatra's admirers were a generation older than his throngs of teenage fans." As adolescent icons, Sinatra, Bennett and Como were

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*Jackson, 20*

*This top-ten list appears in a picture form the Philadelphia Bulletin, February 12, 1955 from The Temple Urban Archives picture collection under “Bandstand.”*


*Ibid., 181.*
indicative of a youth culture still bounded by the assumptions of adult society. And as a show that featured the stylings of these big band carryovers, early *Bandstand* reinforced this definition of youth through the music it played. With regard to music and other markers of cultural distinctiveness, the teenager remained trapped within already-defined social constructs.

Perhaps no aspect of the show’s early years reinforced this concept more clearly than the selection of Bob Horn as *Bandstand*’s host and public face. Horn was the consummate radio personality, a man with a booming voice and years of experience in the broadcasting industry. Horn actually began *Bandstand* as a radio program, but moved the show to television when WFIL gave him the opportunity to try the new medium.45 Born in 1916, Horn looked every bit his age. He was balding and overweight with developing jowls that made him look “more like a used car salesman than a teenager’s Svengali.”46 As an older-looking gentleman, Horn projected himself as more of a caretaker than a teenage confidant. Arlene Sullivan, a regular on the show during Dick Clark’s tenure and a fan of the show during Horn’s, remembers the original host as a “father figure.”47 According to Dave Frees, a *Bandstand* super-fan and eventual president of the national fan club, Horn came off like a “stern school teacher.”48 And so Horn was the symbolic portrait of control, a supervisor figure who could establish an adolescent space under the auspices of proper adult oversight. Just as the show’s allusions to regional pride referenced the home and the school, Horn’s presence encompassed the supreme figures of authority within those institutions, the father and the teacher.

45 Jackson, 10
46 Jackson, 16
47 Interview with Arlene Sullivan.
By projecting a custodial air, *Bandstand* became a safe zone that could mediate between already-approved bastions of adult dominion. Early *Bandstand* did not endorse an autonomous community of teenagers and it was not a separate sphere where youth culture could be defined on its own terms. Rather, the show’s regionalism, the presence of older pop standards, and the distinctly older public persona of its host reinforced the ways in which youth culture remained subject to the authority of the nuclear family.

“A Curious Thing”

This does not suggest that these initial attempts to define teenage identity were entirely successful. In the years that Horn hosted the show, some small signs pointed toward the emergence of a truly separate teenage sphere. In particular, the show’s management and the local press observed a curious youth phenomena. *Bandstand’s* regular dancers became the show’s biggest celebrities, overshadowing the star singers that appeared in-studio. An article in the *Philadelphia Bulletin* from July 17, 1955 explains the seemingly strange development:

In the three years the Bandstand has been in operation, a curious thing has happened. Notwithstanding the fact that many famous vocalists appear on the show during the year — stars like Patti Page, Joni James, Theresa Brewer, Frankie Laine — the ones the Bandstand audiences of the air really go for are the ‘regulars,’ like Jerry! The result is a flood of daily fan mail addressed to the ‘regulars’ from real-gone crazy kids. They don’t mention Joni James’ singing or Patti Page’s personality. They want to see Jerry do a mambo or tango — his specialty — or they ask for more shots of other young favorites.49

Despite the assumption that youth would gravitate toward the “famous vocalists,” it seemed the young people had their own ideas. Teenagers were more interested in other teenagers than they were in even the most famous and talented members of an older

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generation. The regulars did not have any special discernable talent, they just happened to be young. Yet, the bonds of age produced an instant identification that seemed much stronger than any manufactured adolescent identity or assumption about youth tastes. For his part, Horn admitted that he was "dumbfounded" by the ascension of these "fan stars." However, Horn seemed powerless to stop it, and the regulars would soon become a hallmark of the show's success.

It was an early sign of what would become a defining feature of Bandstand, the recurring self-determination of a generation that embraced its youth as a marker of identity. What started as an almost magnetic fascination with other members of their peer group turned into a self-propelled redefinition of the teenager as a social category. Far removed from Madison Avenue's concept, this teenager was not a simple extension of the family unit or a rung on the ladder toward respectable adulthood. The new teenager inhabited a distinct social space beyond the control of parents and teachers and beyond whatever parameters were implicit in those pre-determined power structures. This was a space where the cultural framework of the teenager referred exclusively to the behavior, preferences, and values of other teenagers. Clearly the young people in the Bulletin article already possessed a nascent understanding of themselves as members of a separate group. However, under Bob Horn that space had only just begun to emerge, much of it still buried under the constraints of adult authority. In the history of Bandstand it would be the nearly simultaneous arrival of a new host and a new kind of music that would turn the show into a breeding ground for non-nuclear notions of adolescence. Like they were at the end of World War II, young people were on the verge of another breakthrough.

Ibid.
SECTION II

Dick Clark Speaking:
How a Host Helped Adolescence Fly the Coop

In 1956 the implications of this impending breakthrough meant little to Richard Wagstaff Clark, a local radio host and commercial television pitchman at the WFIL family of stations. On the company ladder, young Dick Clark certainly seemed more than a few rungs away from the venerated Bandstand franchise. By 1956 Bandstand was a local sensation, captivating teenagers from across the region and even inspiring a copycat program in Wilmington, Delaware.\(^{51}\) Riding this wave of success, Bob Horn had built himself into a media personality of unparalleled influence in the Philadelphia area.\(^{52}\) Still stuck in broadcasting’s minor leagues, Dick Clark toiled as the host of a colorless daytime radio program called Dick Clark’s Caravan of Music. In order to keep his face on television the ambitious Clark became a skilled commercial announcer for WFIL-TV. Clark earned a fee for each spot he read, plugging products that ranged from “pots and pans” to “Mrs. Smiths pies.”\(^{53}\) The job paid well enough and Clark was reasonably content to have regular work in a market as big as Philadelphia, but Bob Horn’s personal shortcomings would soon present him with an opportunity to leapfrog the local kingpin.

In June of 1956 the police arrested Horn for driving while intoxicated after he ran a red light. The incident proved particularly embarrassing for Triangle Publications boss Walter Annenberg who promoted himself as a prominent opponent of drunk driving. The

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\(^{51}\) Joe Grady and Ed Hurst hosted the Delaware version of Bandstand. Grady and Hurst originally hosted the radio show that inspired the Bandstand idea and would have been the hosts instead of Horn except that their contractual obligation to a WFIL rival stifled the move. See Jackson, 14.

\(^{52}\) Jackson writes, “The late Tom Donahue, a popular rock ‘n’ roll disc jockey at Philadelphia’s WBIG radio in the 1950s, claimed Horn, ‘was making a lot of money’ and was ‘the closest thing to a Roman Emperor’ he had ever seen.” Jackson, 27.

\(^{53}\) Jackson, 11.
Philadelphia Bulletin, a rival paper of the Annenberg-owned Philadelphia Inquirer, saw the Horn fiasco as an opportunity to humiliate one of Annenberg’s most popular and public employees.54 As the Bulletin began to run wild with the story, even more scandalous revelations about Horn’s personal life came to light. Soon after the driving arrest, management at WFIL got word that Horn might be involved in a sexual relationship with one or more adolescent girls.55 The accusations threatened to undermine the credibility of a man that WFIL promoted as a local father figure. Acting quickly, the station terminated Horn as host of Bandstand only a month after his traffic stop. After a short interim, the previously unheralded Dick Clark took over as the show’s new permanent host. For the young broadcaster it was a promotion of astonishing magnitude.56 In his autobiography, Clark wrote, “I was twenty-five years old and not a little astonished at my good fortune.”57

But what Clark attributed to luck, Roger Clipp saw as a byproduct of the new host’s plucky determination and straight-laced look. Clipp later recalled, “The minute he walked in...I thought to myself we certainly can use this young man. He was well-dressed, clean-cut, polite, a guy knowing where he was going. He gave me the feeling that you could count on him to do a job right.”58 Clipp’s first impression reflected his own generational biases. In Clipp’s eyes Clark was just another media man determined to work his way into the upper echelons, a man who might someday serve as president of

54 This entire account comes from Jackson, 30-32.
55 Dolores Farmer eventually did accuse Horn of statutory rape. Although the court eventually dropped the charges, the trial did irreparable damage to Horn’s career, and he died less than a decade later while in Houston trying to break back into the business. See Jackson, 47-48.
56 There is some speculation that a Clark’s reasonably well-connected father might have influenced Roger Clipp to give the young disc jockey the Bandstand gig. See Jackson, 33.
58 Ralph Edwards. 1959. This is Your Life. television program. Los Angeles: NBC Television, June 24.
the Poor Richard Club. Clark satisfied management’s need to replace Horn with “a spokesman acceptable and believable to adults—preferably a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant who projected mainstream, middle-class values and offered some degree of order and decorum.” In the eyes of men like Roger Clipp, Clark’s respectable exterior seemed to reinforce a domestic understanding of adolescence. He was safe enough to pass through adult censors, to serve as “the spokesman for the great, wholesome majority of American teenagers.” Years later he told historian John Jackson that he used the clean-cut look to avoid harassment from higher-ups at WFIL. He even admitted that his television persona was “150 percent deliberate and well thought out.” This contrived respectability made Clark’s promotion possible. But beyond this guise of normalcy Clark had something quite different in mind when constructing his on-air personality. Unlike Horn, Clark hoped to interact with teenage viewers on more equitable terms by emphasizing his relative youthfulness. Although Clipp recruited Clark as another adolescent shepherd, a supervisory figure much in the same vein as Bob Horn, history proved Clark to be much more adept at subverting that role than fulfilling it.

“That Young Guy”

Born in 1929 in Bronxville, New York, Dick Clark was more than a decade younger than his predecessor Horn. More importantly, Clark’s date of birth situated him on the proper side of a crucial historical divide. Men like Horn, Koehler, Clipp, and Steck served in the Second World War or were considered too old for even that conflict. Clark

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59 Jackson, 40
61 Jackson, 38
62 Jackson, 39
on the other hand was too young to serve, and he did not belong to an adult generation so clearly defined by the war experience. Clark’s physical appearance also contrasted sharply with Horn’s. His full head of hair, bright smile, thin physique, and clean-shaven chin without even a shadowy hint of facial hair made an immediate impression on teenage fans of the show. Before Clark even opened his mouth he looked instantly more authentic in the eyes of youth than the mannish and rotund Horn. Dave Frees remembers first seeing Clark on television in the summer of 1956. He recalls, “When he showed up I remembered the kids at school saying, ‘Did you see that young guy on Bandstand, isn’t he cool?’ I said, ‘Yeah he’s like one of us.’ And that’s how you related to Dick because he didn’t seem older like the other one.” All of a sudden the “other one” was an afterthought, replaced by the fresh-faced and relentlessly handsome Clark.

Frees’ observation that Clark was “one of us” became a trademark of the host’s public image. In obvious ways Clark attempted to position himself among his teenage followers instead of casting himself as an adult supervisor. On camera and in interviews Clark promoted himself as America’s resident expert on adolescence to adults and a trusted advisor among youths, someone who understood their daily trials and tribulations. Clark strived from the outset to form a friendly rapport with young viewers, one that contrasted with Horn’s more paternal approach. Clark recalled in his autobiography, “I always thought Horn did a poor job relating to the kids. His conversation with them was stilted; he never associated with them as equals. I talked to the kids on the same intellectual level. I never became a teen idol or a father figure. I tried as hard as possible to be their friend.”

Clark’s approach translated into immediate success, as he bolstered

63 Interview with Dave Frees
64 Clark and Robinson, 48
his youthfulness with a personal vibe that parlayed a sense of intimacy and understanding. The Philadelphia Bulletin wrote of Clark in 1960, “He has become the teenagers’ friend and confidant. They feel he understands them, and they return bountiful loyalty to him.” Clark reveled in this role, celebrating his distinct relationship with America’s teenagers in very public settings.

That relationship took center stage on a 1960 episode of The Jack Benny Program that featured Clark as Benny’s special guest. The comedian promoted Clark as, “someone who knows more about teenagers than anybody else in the world.” The plot of the episode revolves around Benny’s painfully inept attempts to profit from Clark’s expertise and remake his public image. When Benny asks Clark for advice on how to best relate to teenagers, Clark responds, “I find that if you take a personal interest in their problems, you’re alright.” Clark then points out a pile of envelopes on his desk and adds, “Oh for instance all this mail Jack, here. All this mail has come to me from teenagers who have problems. I’ve discovered that the best way to handle it is to try to answer them as carefully, as conscientiously as I can.” In the role of pen pal Clark could convey his interpersonal relationship with youth. He was someone they could trust, someone who would treat their problems with sympathy instead of dismissing them as child’s play. Dick Clark was the television host you could write a letter to because he got it, he understood what being a teenager was like.

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
Clark the Columnist

Clark carried that feeling of intimacy into other professional endeavors, specifically focusing on his role as a teenage advisor in several mediums. In the late 1950s Dick Clark wrote a weekly advice column for teenagers that lends a great deal of insight into the host's mindset regarding his place in the adolescent world. The installments, which began in 1958, featured letters from teenagers and parents of teenagers. Clark would respond in-turn with friendly guidance. The series, known as "Dick Clark Speaking," appeared in the magazine This Week. These articles showcase Clark as an adolescent role model, someone who gives teens the personal attention they deserve, and someone with the perspective of a comrade.

In a column entitled “Parents vs. Rock ‘n’ Roll” Clark establishes his place as a comrade. In his responses Clark acknowledges parental concerns about rock ‘n’ roll music, but defends the genre and its associated lifestyle against all comers. In a letter called “Father Won’t Listen,” Sylvia from Milwaukee claims that her parents don’t like her because she is a rock ‘n’ roll fan. She says that her fandom marks her as a black sheep in the family, and that her parents shower her brother with all sorts of favoritism simply because of her deviant musical tastes. To the complaint Clark responds tactfully:

I’m sorry, honey, to hear that your parents don’t like rock ‘n’ roll, but I’m absolutely certain they don’t dislike you because you do. Perhaps rock ‘n’ roll stands for poor marks in school, indifference and laziness at home...help out around the house and you may end up by teaching your parents that rock ‘n’ roll is not a misguided way of life.

69 This Week, a predecessor of Parade magazine, was a Sunday morning insert featured in newspapers across the country. On an episode of This is Your Life with Ralph Edwards, the host cites the magazine’s circulation at about 12 million. Ralph Edwards. 1959. This is Your Life. television program. Los Angeles: NBC Television, June 24.

70 Dick Clark, “Dick Clark Speaking: Parents Vs. Rock ‘n’ Roll,” This Week, February 8, 1959.
Clark’s assertion that rock ‘n’ roll was a “way of life” underscored his broader endorsement of teenage cultural autonomy. Naturally Clark defends the right to listen to rock ‘n’ roll, simply asking teenagers to let their parents see the light.

At a time when many adult observers interpreted markers of adolescent culture as symbols of criminal behavior, Clark’s stance caused a bit of a stir. His advocacy of youth earned him nicknames such as “the Czar of the Switchblade Set” and “Kingpin of the Teen-Age Mafia.” In response to these negative portrayals Clark told The New York Times, “I am always puzzled why anybody should dislike me because I am associate with young people, and because I defend teen-agers’ musical likes and dislikes.” In all honesty Clark probably disregarded those who disliked him because such acrimony only further enhanced his reputation as a teenage advocate. Clark celebrated rock ‘n’ roll, teenage dating, high school social life and all of those age-related markers that defined youth culture as something very separate from adult society. To his teenage admirers he was the one sympathetic adult in a seemingly endless sea of hostility.

Although Clark’s techniques could be subtle, at times they often explicitly advocated teenage autonomy in a volume much louder than expected. In Clark’s inaugural column he responds with force to a worried parent in a sub-section called “What Is A Teen-Ager?” In the letter, Mrs. F.W. from Des Moines worries that her 18-year-old daughter hangs out too much with “those Bohemian ‘beatnik generation’ crowds,” and that their influence is leading her daughter astray. Clark’s strongly-worded response reads as follows:

Well, Mrs. F.W., who in heaven’s name ever said an 18-year-old girl is a teen-ager? What is a teen-ager anyway? Maybe you and I don’t agree; but for me

72 Ibid.
teen-age isn't something that blooms on the thirteenth birthday and fades away obediently on the twentieth. Being a teen-ager is a state of mind and a condition of body — not a date on the calendar...To treat 12-year-olds as babies and 18-year-olds as teen-agers is to baby both.

What you're doing, Mrs. F.W., is attempting to turn your pretty butterfly back into a caterpillar. She's certainly old enough to fly by herself without any self-righteous "ack-ack" from home port.73

Within the text Clark’s range as youth advocate is on full display. His notion that “teen-ager is a state of mind” defies attempts to bottle-up the adolescent neatly inside the category of family member. Teenager was something distinct, and Clark acknowledges that in his response. Furthermore, his insistence that a 12-year-old is not a baby emphasizes a notion that teenagers are old enough to make choices and define their own world to a certain extent. Clark rails against any attempt at so-called reverse metamorphosis because it attempts to restrict such choices in the name of misappropriated parental authority. In his articles Clark made teenage maturity central to his argument, and in doing so he helped legitimize the cultural nexus of youth.

Beyond such blatant appeals, Clark achieved a similar result by simply acknowledging that teenagers had real life problems, and that those problems deserved careful consideration. In his column Clark made sure to address more somber issues in order to convey the sense that teenagers endured the same sort of emotionally complex issues faced by adults. At the same time, Clark used such examples to simultaneously distinguish youth from their adult counterparts on a cultural basis. An installment of “Dick Clark Speaking,” printed in This Week on May 3, 1959, underscores such intentions, and his ability to serve as a confidant to teenagers while emphasizing their distinctiveness as young people. In this edition, entitled “When It Hurts to Be Young,” Clark addresses letters from teenagers with more serious or adult-like problems. In this

73 Dick Clark, “Dick Clark Speaking,” This Week, November 23, 1958.
particular column differentiating between teen and child is a point of emphasis. In the introduction to the piece, Clark writes:

You may have gotten the idea from reading this column that the only thing America’s teenagers worry about is where their next date is coming from. That’s a long way from true. Many a youngster has troubles that would be tough for an adult to take... 74

This opening sentiment situates Clark as a sympathetic listener, someone who treats teenage problems with seriousness. By doing so Clark acknowledges that teenagers have adult-like pressures, the sorts of responsibilities that separate adolescents from children.

For example, Clark’s response to a 17-year-old girl named Wendy employs this sober tone. Wendy tells Clark that an “emotional breakdown” 75 caused her to spend ten months in a state hospital. After recovering her mental health Wendy returned home to find that her former friends no longer liked her. Wendy desperately wants to fit in again and asks Clark to guide her transition back into social acceptance. Clark tells Wendy, “The suffering you’ve experienced has probably left you with a deeper understanding of yourself than most of the people around you have of themselves.” 76 Clark adds later, “People are afraid of things they don’t understand...” 77 In these statements Clark lends Wendy’s plight a sense of universal legitimacy, saying that Wendy’s dilemma helped her mature, and expressing her peers’ reactions as natural human reactions to fear of the unknown. In Clark’s response Wendy is not a child, rather she is a seasoned young person with a deep self-awareness. Clark never questions Wendy’s ability to make decisions or understand her own problem.

74 Dick Clark, “Dick Clark Speaking: When It Hurts to Be Young,” This Week, May 3, 1959.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
And while he emphasizes Wendy’s maturity, Clark also points out the differences between youth and adults in his proposed solution to Wendy’s ostracism. Clark maps out a strategy for regaining acceptance, and in this plan Clark highlights certain teenage activities that separate teen culture from adult culture. Clark’s plan reads as follows:

Surely you have one friend on whom you can count...Go shopping with her, stop at the most popular place in town for a soda...After a few weeks of being seen where the “crowd” gathers, have your mother invite a small group to the house...After that, you can give a series of parties for both boys and girls, and I’m sure that with time and patience you’ll find yourself once again an accepted member of the group.78

Clark’s mention of the “most popular place in town for a soda,” or the concept of “where the ‘crowd’ gathers,” accentuate particularities of teen culture and the autonomy of adolescent spaces. Clark’s proposed house party also validates adolescent patterns of social congregation. Clark is careful to treat Wendy as someone with adult-like maturity who also belongs to a group with separate cultural norms, one that defines itself as non-adult in nature. The responses in “Dick Clark Speaking” repeatedly strike this balance, and in doing so Clark promoted the idea of a distinct but equally-worthy teenage culture. The column also referenced an increasingly national and participatory vision of youth. By responding to letter writers from around the country and by asking for teenage submissions, Clark acknowledged the supra-regionalism of adolescence and further suggested that teenagers had some nascent political right to express their point of view.

“Because They’re Young”

Not surprisingly, Clark carried a similar insight into his first Hollywood acting role. In the 1960 release “Because They’re Young” Clark starred as high school teacher

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78 Ibid.
Neil Hendry, a young instructor with an exceptional interest in his students’ extra-curricular troubles. In the film Clark helps troubled youth overcome issues ranging in severity from a sour relationship to sexual misconduct to alcoholic parents. In the beginning of the movie trailer, the screen reads, “‘Because they’re young’...or are they?” The bold letters echo a typical Clark refrain, the sense that teenagers deal with the same sort of problems encountered by adults but face them from the unique perspective of teenager. The trailer then transitions into a montage of melodramatic encounters, teenagers pushed to the edge by a dizzying array of difficult life choices. Into the fray steps Clark’s character, a teacher who understands young people’s daily dilemmas and comes to serve them with an air of solidarity and understanding.

Predictably not everyone in this fictional high school supports Clark’s mission to “to teach his kids more than the textbooks allow.” In particular, the no-nonsense principal accuses Clark of overstepping his role as an educator. Eventually Clark’s missionary zeal wins out and, as a review for the Philadelphia Bulletin put it, “by a policy of non-violence and persuasion” he wins the higher-ups over. As the language of the article suggests, the movie casts Clark’s struggle as a mighty one between older notions of adult authority and a forward-looking understanding of the teenager. In this sense, Clark’s character symbolized a full-circle rejection of Bob Horn’s Bandstand. Horn came across as a disciplinarian, as the sort of school teacher caricatured by Clark’s nemesis Principal Donlan. Speaking more broadly the teacher as a cultural metaphor represented a station of adult authority, the school house where youth culture might be

81 Ibid.
manipulated and subjugated by adult control. But in “Because They’re Young” Clark’s portrayal subverts that stereotype by turning the role of teacher on its head. In the movie Clark understands youth, talks to them on their level, and seeks to reconcile their troubles with a world that unjustly persecutes them.

Clark’s portrayal of Neil Hendry in “Because They’re Young” was a perfect parable for his relationship with the public. To the adult world he was still a teacher, or a mature older brother, or even a young parent, someone who could understand their concerns. Sometimes in *Dick Clark Speaking*, Clark even came down on the side of curfews and mild dating restrictions. But to teens he was their defender, a man who might correspond with the authorities, but would ultimately cast his allegiance with youth. In reference to Clark, Jimmy Murphy, a fifteen-year-old *Bandstand* dancer, told *This Week*, “He’s always willing to talk to you. He tries to build teens up, not tear them down like some people do.” Donna Pappas, a fellow fifteen-year-old dancer expressed a similar thought, “Dick isn’t phony. He has a wonderful smile that’s real. He’s really interested in what you’re saying.” Clark exuded authenticity in his look and in his delivery.

Without a doubt, money interests drove the image-obsessed Clark toward this public self-definition. Clark was as much a salesman as those that came before, but it was his approach that distinguished him. By promoting himself as America’s most prominent advocate of the teenager, Clark enabled youth culture to move outside of the childhood-adulthood binary and, more importantly, outside of the realm of adult control. Clark was

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82 For example, Clark once wrote to a writer named Rita, “I feel, Rita, that you can wait a few years for that 10 o’clock curfew and that Mom’s nine is a happy medium. See Dick Clark, “Dick Clark Speaking: ‘Know Thyself’-And You’ll Be You!,” *This Week*, November 30, 1958.
84 Ibid.
a figure of transition, a man still tied to the mainstream in critical ways who could
simultaneously shift the definition of teenager beyond the nuclear family structure by
serving as a surrogate for authority. He could play teacher or parent, but within those
roles he subverted them and made them sympathetic to adolescent independence. As
such, Clark contributed to the creation of an autonomous youth culture predicated on a
self-definition of youth instead of older notions of what youth should resemble.

In the context of these new possibilities, Dick Clark’s *Bandstand* would become
more than just a dance show directed at teenagers, more than a dictation of youth directed
by those trapped in an outmoded mindset. It would become America’s premier forum for
the faraway sound of rock ‘n’ roll. In 1960, just four years removed from the sleepy
backwater of *Dick Clark’s Caravan of Music*, the trendsetting host swam amidst a sea-
change in the world of music and the world of youth. Teenagers were eagerly embracing
their recently-discovered difference, and Dick Clark moved with them in earnest.
SECTION III

“Strange Noises”: Rock ‘n’ Roll and Bandstand as a Mirror for Youth

When Dick Clark took over as Bandstand’s host in 1956 he admitted knew little about popular music. In his autobiography Clark noted that he recognized only “one or two” of the songs on the playlist the day he started. Clark would later write of his first day on the job, “I arrived at the ‘Bandstand’ set at two that afternoon with only a foggy notion of what the kids, music, and show were really about.” In particular, Clark did not know much about the rock ‘n’ roll music that Bob Horn had introduced to the show during his final days. Clark realized his ignorance was a strike against him, and he eagerly seized upon the opportunity to learn more about rock ‘n’ roll as a method of making inroads into youth culture. The crystallization of Clark’s public image as a teenage insider relied on the progress of his rock ‘n’ roll expertise. Clark recalled years later, “The more I heard the music, the more I enjoyed it; the more I enjoyed it, the more I understood the kids. I began to loosen up. I listened to the kids and let them tell me what they liked.” They were mutually reinforcing processes: the more Clark knew about rock ‘n’ roll the more he knew about teenage culture, and the more Clark could bolster youth culture outside the family structure the more easily rock ‘n’ roll could operate as a symbol of adolescent difference.

Clark’s crash course in rock ‘n’ roll came via the radio, a source that Clark and his producer Tony Mammarella scoured for potential breakout records. Due to the rising popularity of television during the 1950s, radio executives found themselves aggressively

85 Clark and Robinson, 50.
86 Ibid., 48.
87 Ibid., 50.
targeting more culturally and geographically localized audiences.\textsuperscript{88} Whereas television focused on the generic, radio found itself scrambling toward fragmented sections of the population in order to accommodate viewers not included in television’s mainstream consensus. At a time when those in media and advertising did not consider the possibility of a truly national and autonomous teenage market, radio filled the void and became Clark’s pipeline to the subculture of youth. Radio was a link to the sounds considered too unconventional for the small screen.

\textbf{“The Guy With the Goods”}

Clark’s un-official guide in the landscape of youth radio was Georgie “the guy with the goods” Woods. Woods was a popular disc jockey at WDAS, one of Philadelphia’s most prominent black-oriented stations. Born in Georgia in 1928, Woods moved north to New York City at a young age and graduated from the city’s public high schools. Woods eventually found his way to Philadelphia in 1952 where he soon began work as a radio personality.\textsuperscript{89} With his ear turned toward the teenager Woods became an early local source for black rhythm and blues music and the genre that eventually became known as rock ‘n’ roll. For his services local adolescents showered Woods with praise, and in a 1962 poll students at Girls High, William Penn, Bartram, Southern, West Philadelphia, Germantown and Overbrook public high schools all rated Woods the best disc jockey in the area.\textsuperscript{90} \textit{The Philadelphia Inquirer} called Woods the “uncrowned king of teenage Philadelphia,” and his rock ‘n’ roll shows at the Uptown Theater in North Philadelphia became legendary for the artists they showcased and the crowds they

\textsuperscript{88} Medovoi, 99.
\textsuperscript{89} All information gathered from Woods biography in Temple Urban Archives
Clark took notice of Woods’ popularity and began tuning in to his broadcasts. Clark wrote of his initiation into rock ‘n’ roll, “Every few days Tony [Mammarella] and I checked out the local Philadelphia radio scene to see if any records were creating excitement... We paid special attention to WDAS, the most popular black station in town. I became friends with Georgie Woods, one of WDAS’S top DJ’s. He was my line to the black music market. Many records played on ‘Bandstand’ came on first as hits that were brewing on WDAS.” The personal and professional connection between Clark and Woods was not an obvious one. Although they were born just one year apart the two men came from different worlds, Woods from the segregated South and Clark from the comfortable New York suburb of Bronxville. It was the teenager that brought them together, and it was the teenager that made their careers.

In many ways this is the story of rock ‘n’ roll in the context of youth culture and in the context of American Bandstand. The teenager as a denizen of a distinct social space became subject to multifarious inputs, inputs necessarily restricted under the former guise of adult authority. Rock ‘n’ roll was one of those inputs, and it linked segregated worlds in ways that would redefine youth culture. When Dick Clark turned his daily dance show into a rock ‘n’ roll forum, he both acknowledged the distinctiveness of youth and colored that distinctiveness with sounds from a non-suburban, non-nuclear world (or at least non-nuclear in the lily-white, advertising sense of the word). It was in the context of the teenager that white kids danced and listened to black music.

Rock ‘n’ roll’s development mirrored the journey of people like Georgie Woods; it was the musical legacy of southern migrants who carried gospel-inspired blues with

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92 Clark and Robinson, 58.
them into northern cities during the early-to-mid twentieth century. Upon arrival that rural style mixed with the furious and fast-paced beat of urban life, creating the basic formula for black rhythm and blues music.\(^\text{93}\) Some combination of rhythm and blues along with the rural white sound known as country or rockabilly music inspired what are often considered the first rock ‘n’ roll records.\(^\text{94}\) This combination of genres created, in the form of rock ‘n’ roll, what Leerom Medovoi calls a “countersuburban imaginary.”\(^\text{95}\) Rock ‘n’ roll appropriated working-class rural and urban musical landscapes, and in doing so it necessarily contradicted a domesticated understanding of youth. At a time when advertisers tried to define adolescence as a role within the upwardly-mobile middle class family unit, rock ‘n’ roll challenged that notion with its outsider roots.

That is to say that in order for rock ‘n’ roll to reach a critical mass of listeners there needed to be some group willing to understand itself as somehow outside the mainstream. For Dick Clark and his largely white studio audience, their connection to these outsider sounds came through the category of youth. An understanding of youth culture outside the nuclear family structure made a marriage between rock ‘n’ roll and adolescence possible. An identity centered exclusively on age dulled the prohibitions of an identity based on whiteness, or suburbanness or normative familial roles. In turn, rock ‘n’ roll became a crucial tool toward defining youth culture as autonomous. This is the reciprocal role of rock ‘n’ roll, a genre enabled by youth identity and one that further distinguished adolescence as separate.

On \textit{American Bandstand} that process played out before a national audience of eager young viewers. A string of live appearances by prominent rock ‘n’ roll artists in

\(^{93}\) Szatmary, 3-8.
\(^{94}\) Friedlander, 16.
\(^{95}\) Medovoi, 104.
November and December of 1957 underscore the ways in which rock ‘n’ roll transformed youth. These months serve as a critical historical lens because 1957 was a significant year for *Bandstand*. On August 5th the show entered national syndication, appearing on sixty-seven ABC affiliates around the country. Now known as *American Bandstand*, in order to reflect its coast-to-coast constituency, Dick Clark’s matinee became the first network vehicle for rock ‘n’ roll music. Besides playing all of the day’s most popular records, *American Bandstand* regularly featured appearances by chart-topping rock ‘n’ roll performers. Those performances became the primary visual showcase for musicians previously confined to the one-sense medium of radio. In the first year of syndication alone, artists such as The Everly Brothers, Johnny Cash, Sam Cooke, Buddy Holly and the Crickets, Dion, and Jackie Wilson all made their national television debuts on *American Bandstand*. This was uncharted territory for rock ‘n’ roll music, a foray into the increasingly impactful medium of television coupled with an entirely new format of presentation. On *American Bandstand* picture and audio combined to create a more acute sensory transmission of rock ‘n’ roll’s place in youth culture.

The four *American Bandstand* performances chronicled below tell the story of rock ‘n’ roll’s journey from outsider music to the music of an outsider identity. These snippets of *Bandstand* history reveal the critical role that rock ‘n’ roll music played in the project of constructing teenage identity by looking at the songs performed and the way the musicians performed them. From a vaguely distant string of strange noises to a musical affirmation of separated teenage spaces, *Bandstand*’s music showcased the

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96 Shore, 13.
97 Jackson, 132.
development of rock ‘n’ roll as it entered the teenage world and became the acoustic banner of its authenticity.

**The Killer**

Perhaps no artist of the early rock ‘n’ roll period personified difference better than the piano-banging, god-fearing, white rockabilly star Jerry Lee Lewis. Born in 1935, in the heart of the Great Depression, Lewis hailed from the railroad town of Ferriday, Louisiana. Ferriday was a predominantly black community of about 2,500 located in the cotton-rich parish of Concordia in eastern Louisiana. The community featured a schoolhouse, a handful of churches, a bank, and a hotel, all connected by a network of sprawling unpaved roads.\(^98\) The son of a deeply-religious mother, Lewis’ first exposure to music came through gospel hymns and church songs he heard at Sunday morning services. As he grew, a curious young Jerry Lee began to hang around the “tar-shingled juke joints where the bad black people drank.”\(^99\) There Lewis heard the growling sound of Delta blues music from men that he supposed had “sold their souls to the devil.”\(^100\)

Somewhere inside Lewis the songs of God and man and devil fused together, creating a down-home sound that carried the talented young piano player out of rural Louisiana and into the care of legendary rockabilly producer Sam Phillips.

When the kid from Ferriday arrived at the *American Bandstand* studios in West Philadelphia on November 4, 1957 he looked like he had stepped out of another world. He might as well have, because Lewis’ personal and musical legacy shared little overlap with the young members of his urban-dwelling, East Coast audience. But it wasn’t until

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\(^99\) Ibid., 46.
\(^100\) Ibid., 46.
Lewis began to play that his nonconformist image came to its full sensory fruition. Clark later described a performance by Lewis on The Dick Clark Show, his Saturday night show from New York City, in the following terms:

The theater resounded with the sound of the kids squealing and clapping along. He was dressed in a black tuxedo with leopard spot print lapels and leopard edging on the pockets and sleeves. Flashes of fire went off behind him as he shouted the lyrics and banged the keyboard.\(^{101}\)

During that Saturday night performance Lewis tossed his hair about, kicked his legs in the air, and ultimately punctuated the number by standing up from the piano bench and screaming “yah” as the crowd squealed its approval.\(^{102}\) Nicknamed “the killer,” Lewis’ flamboyant playing style earned him the reputation of a wild man and endeared him to young fans. He was out of control in every sense, a man unhindered by the restraints of adult authority. To many teenagers his exoticism added to his charm, he was the visual and musical apparition of a place they could only imagine. Lewis’ style and swagger evoked the wild and untamed rural expanse. He was the antithesis of carefully manicured lawns and well-planned suburban streets. Bandstand regular Arlene Sullivan noticed the frenzied response when performers like Lewis or fellow-eccentric Little Richard stopped by the studio. She recalls:

> When Jerry Lee Lewis came onto the show and Little Richard, everybody, [the kids] went nuts, they went crazy...and I looked around and I said, man these kids they love this guy Little Richard, and they love this Jerry Lee Lewis. Because I never heard rock ‘n’ roll music until really I went to the show. You gotta remember when we were watching the show [during the Bob Horn era] they were still playing Perry Como, Rosemary Clooney and Tony Bennett.\(^{103}\)

\(^{101}\) Clark and Robinson, 125-26.
\(^{103}\) Interview with Arlene Sullivan
Smooth, sophisticated lounge-style singers like Clooney and Bennett epitomized white urban-suburban taste. Lewis defied that image at every turn. He often stood up while he played his piano, sometimes even leaving his feet to climb atop the apparatus. On American Bandstand Lewis projected that frenzied performance style to a nation of eager young viewers seeking release from the suburban domestic structure.

Lewis' November 4th appearance was actually his second on American Bandstand. He had made his network television premier at the WFIL-TV studio on August 19th of that same year. In August Lewis performed his first hit song, “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Going On.” When he returned to the program in November, Lewis was set to perform a new single, “Great Balls of Fire,” the record that would rise to #2 on the charts and eventually became the biggest hit of his entire career. “Great Balls of Fire” was the song that lyrically and musically captured Lewis’ otherness, and as such it became a landmark recording in the history of rock ‘n’ roll.

The song starts with three quick beats on the piano followed by a break in the music as Lewis shouts, “You shake my nerves and you rattle my brain.” The rest of the first verse follows in this pattern with the focus vacillating between the Lewis’ brightly-toned piano and his high, cracking voice. At the end of the verse Lewis exclaims “Goodness gracious, great balls of fire,” with his voice reaching a high-pitched crescendo on the word gracious. With this declaration Lewis and his band then set off into a fast-paced rhythm that infects the entirety of the one minute and fifty second rock ‘n’ roll joy ride. The rest of the lyrics relate the story of Lewis’ vaguely described sexual exploits with a woman he finds irresistible. Although the sexuality of the song certainly set off a number of adult censors, it was the often-inane features of Lewis’ words and affectations

104 Friedlander, 48.
that best communicated his foreignness. At one point Lewis says, “Kiss me baby,” followed by a deep-throated sound that suggests satisfaction. Later on he screams, “mine, mine, mine” in a crazed falsetto that complements the high-to-low keyboard swipes he mixes in throughout the number. Perhaps young viewers understood the innuendo, perhaps they did not; perhaps they understood it and didn’t even care. But as Arlene Sullivan notes, young viewers certainly took note of Lewis’ frantic style, lively dress, and jumping piano music, all of which reverberated with the echoes of his rural upbringing. Jerry Lee Lewis made strange noises, and teenagers loved it.

The Teenage Poet Laureate

As a fellow veteran of the rock ‘n’ roll scene, singer and songwriter Chuck Berry knew plenty about the killer’s on-stage antics. In fact the first in-person meeting between Berry and Lewis has become something of rock ‘n’ roll lore. During the first night of a joint tour in spring of 1958 Lewis reportedly set fire to his piano after a particularly-lively set in part because he objected to the fact that Berry earned top billing. Berry’s first encounter with Dick Clark fostered a similar sense of tension. On Friday November 8, 1957, just four days after Lewis’ performance of “Great Balls of Fire,” Berry arrived for the first time on the American Bandstand set. Upon getting to the studio Clark informed Berry that he would lip-sync his song “Sweet Little Sixteen” as was Bandstand protocol. Berry, apparently not aware of the procedure, refused and told Clark he wanted to perform the song live. According to Clark the miffed Berry also informed the host that

105 Friedlander uses the description “rock’s first poet laureate” to refer to Chuck Berry. Friedlander, 34.
106 This is popular legend recounted as fact by Tosches on page 145 but disputed in an unauthorized biography of Berry by Bruce Pegg see Bruce Pegg, Brown Eyed Handsome Man (New York: Routledge, 2002), 89.
he, "ain’t gonna do no dancing," referring to the famous duck walk he performed during guitar solos. Eventually Clark got Leonard Chess of Berry’s label Chess Records on the phone. Chess convinced Berry to go along with Clark’s plan and the appearance went on as scheduled.

Berry’s account differs slightly from Clark’s. Berry claims he never told Clark he wouldn’t dance and certainly never used the so-called “negroid” dialect that Clark referenced in his retelling of the encounter. In his own autobiography Berry recalled, “It’s hardly likely anyone whose mother taught school would be trained to speak in such a fashion.” Berry’s reference to his mother reveals a major difference between himself and Jerry Lee Lewis. Whereas Lewis came from poor rural white farmers, Berry grew up in relative comfort as a member of the black middle class in St. Louis, Missouri. Born in 1926 to a building maintenance contractor who was active in the Baptist church, Berry’s musical background combined gospel music and the standard pop tunes of the day.

In the early 1950s Berry turned to blues music as a way to supplement his income, and on the advice of blues legend Muddy Waters, Berry traveled to Chicago in 1954 to see Leonard Chess about making a career in the music industry. In 1955 Chess Records released Berry’s first single, a reworked country song that Berry called “Maybellene.” The song quickly rose to the top of the rhythm and blues charts, and Berry’s night job in blues soon turned into a trailblazing career in the newly-minted genre of rock ‘n’ roll. By the time of his 1957 appearance Berry already sat atop the record industry. The song “Rock ‘n’ Roll Music,” his high-tempo tribute to the genre, was

107 Clark and Robinson, 73-74
109 Berry, 185.
110 Friedlander, 33
111 Pegg, 31-33.
enjoying a nineteen week run on the pop charts when he came to Bandstand hoping to spur similar success for his latest single. The song, entitled “Sweet Little Sixteen,” expressed on many levels Berry’s songwriting signature. Throughout his career Berry masterfully bridged the gap between rock ‘n’ roll’s black, rural origins and its white, adolescent audience by matching the genre’s rollicking sound with lyrics centered around teenage concerns and adolescent cultural references. Songs like “School Days,” “Oh Baby Doll,” “Almost Grown,” “Sweet Little Rock ‘n’ Roller,” and “Little Queenie” all combined teenage-themed content with Berry’s famous guitar licks and jumping backbeat. Berry’s songs were like Dick Clark’s weekly musings in This Week magazine set to music. Berry connected Clark’s substance to sound.

“Sweet Little Sixteen” forged that link in obvious ways, a songwriting style that made the ballad instantly recognizable to American Bandstand’s young viewers. The song revolves around a nation-wide dance party dedicated to the sixteenth birthday of a teenage girl. By using the common reference point of a sweet sixteen birthday party Berry captures the sort of anxieties and amusements experienced by his fans. In the first verse Berry talks about young people’s affinity for celebrity, referencing the birthday girl who has “just got to have / about a half a million / framed autographs.” Not coincidentally all of Dick Clark’s guest performers on Bandstand went to the autograph table after their appearance, an obvious homage to the widely-practiced teenage hobby. Berry’s acknowledgement of memorabilia expressed an implicit understanding of the adolescent cultural practices that older people might consider irrational quirks. In the second verse Berry moves from cultural practice to familiar relationships, relating the common teenage struggle between child and parent. He tells of the girl’s wish to see a
rock 'n' roll concert, singing, “Oh mommy mommy / please may I go / it’s such a sight to see/somebody steal the show. / Oh daddy daddy / I beg of you / whisper to mommy / it’s alright with you.” This portrayal of parental restriction certainly resonated with teens who often found themselves in similar scenarios, bargaining over curfew times and clothing limitations. And in the song’s final verse Berry acted out the ultimate struggle between teenage autonomy and adult supervision, this time in the form of normative education. He sings:

Sweet Little Sixteen / she's got the grown up blues / tight dress and lipstick / she's sportin' high heal shoes. / Oh, but tomorrow morning / she'll have to change her trend / and be sweet sixteen / and back in class again.

In this concluding note Berry expresses the ever-present tension between teenage fantasies of independent sophistication and the oppressive nature of the classroom. For his listeners these were the struggles of youth, the impulse to dance, and rock outside the supervisory forces of school and family. “Sweet Little Sixteen,” was a musical tribute to the autonomous impulses of youth culture, a lyrical clash between adult authority and a non-nuclear teenager identity.

The refrain in “Sweet Little Sixteen” expresses this tendency toward independence in a more subtle way. Berry breaks up the verses by singing about all the places around the country where teenagers will celebrate this adolescent birthday bash. He says that “cats” in Boston, Pittsburgh, “the heart of Texas,” and “‘round the ‘Frisco bay,” all want to dance with “sweet little sixteen.” The geographic references coupled with adolescent slang transmit an image of national youth culture. Contrasted against Bob Horn’s depiction of local youngsters, Berry recognized a countrywide network of young people all interested in the same music, same dance, and same hobbies. This fictional
birthday party was an affirmation of youth as a supra-regional phenomenon; youth connected more with each other than the localized networks of school and family.

Of course Berry did not just sing about adolescent themes, he combined those themes with a rocking backbeat infused with notes of difference. “Sweet Little Sixteen” starts with one of Berry’s trademark guitar riffs, a clarion call of rock ‘n’ roll music. In the middle of the song Berry’s pianist Johnnie Johnson pounds out a frenetic solo that would put the keyboard-swiping Jerry Lee Lewis on notice. With his greased-back hair and an electric guitar perennially slung across his shoulder, Berry accessed those outsider worlds. When he broke into one of his duck walks, crouched low with his guitar pressed between his thigh and chest, Berry distinguished himself from the pop crooners of a previous era. In a sense, Berry brought the sound and image of Jerry Lee Lewis’ distant world into focus. He took the non-suburban roots of rock ‘n’ roll and put them into a teenage context, connecting the genre to the everyday lives of its most ardent fans.

In that way Berry resembled Dick Clark. Like Clark, Berry was a good bit older than his fans. By the time of his appearance in 1957 Berry was already 31 years old. Despite his age, however, Berry could pass in the world of youth because he sung about youth culture in ways that suggested he obviously understood it. Like Clark he was a cooler older brother, a slightly-seasoned guide through the exciting world of rock ‘n’ roll. In “Sweet Little Sixteen” Berry made the connection between singer and host explicit by adding the line “they’ll be rockin’ on Bandstand / Philadelphia, PA” to each of the final two refrains. In fact Berry so admired Clark’s rapport with teenagers that he eventually opened a music venue in his hometown of St. Louis called Club Bandstand in tribute to the show that helped further his career and with designs that his club might someday
generate similar enthusiasm. From the inauspicious beginnings of November 8, Clark and Berry began to develop mutual respect over many future encounters in the music business, a tacit acknowledgement of their similar place in the nexus of youth culture.

**Teen Dreams**

But for all his poetic portraits of youth, Berry could not exude adolescence in one crucial regard, he was too old to be the real thing. Dick Clark’s guest on December 12, 1957 played that part effortlessly. His name was Frankie Avalon, an 18-year-old from South Philadelphia who appeared to perform the song that would become the first hit of his career. The single, “De De Dinah,” was an irreverent love song backed by a fairly up-tempo beat and wailing saxophone. And while the song’s love-sick theme was nothing new, the studio audience, fans at home, and the teenage nation at-large immediately recognized Avalon as one of their own. His bright smile, dark eyes, and thin physique made him a teenage girl’s dream date and many a teenage boy’s ideal. Of course “De De Dinah” had a musical component other than the attributes of its singer. Avalon’s high-pitched affectations throughout the song echoed those of Jerry Lee Lewis, especially when he pinched the “I” sound in lines like “I love to squeeze her” and “I love to tease her.” And like the killer, Avalon often repeated certain words and sounds like in the chorus when he crooned, “There’s nothing for me she wouldn’t do, do-do-do-do.” These were not trivial stylistic choices; they very directly recalled the sound and feel of rock ‘n’ roll. Whereas Chuck Berry bridged the gap between the genre’s roots and the teenage

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112 Pegg, 107-109.
113 Exactly eight days after the performance “De De Dinah” entered the pop charts and stayed there for 15 weeks, topping out at #7. See Shore, 81.
world through his lyrics, Avalon achieved the same sense of fusion by simply imitating rock ‘n’ roll’s peculiarities and performing himself.

Self-performance, however, entailed a lot more than one singing appearance on *American Bandstand*. Avalon was just one member of an entire community of teenage idols who brought rock ‘n’ roll and youth culture closer together by portraying an ideal of youth through music. Not coincidentally many of the other young stars came from Philadelphia, a late 1950s music Mecca partly because of its association with *American Bandstand*. Stars like Fabian (of South Philadelphia) and Bobby Rydell (of the same neighborhood) teamed up with fellow youngsters Paul Anka, Neil Sedaka, and Annette Funicello to create a network of do-it-yourself rock ‘n’ rollers. Through their youthful image, which was plastered all over television and magazines, these performers enabled adolescent culture to claim rock ‘n’ roll as its own. In the realm of teen idols rock ‘n’ roll was not simply a way of representing teenage outsider inclinations, but a way for teenagers to express their own distinctiveness.

Teenage journals like *16 Magazine* furthered this sentiment by enhancing the intimacy of the relationship between teen idol and fan. Feature pieces such as an exclusive look inside Frankie Avalon’s home in New Jersey or a piece called “I Confess” by Fabian created an egalitarian sense that fans really knew the stars, and that the stars were more like them than they could have ever imagined.114 Although the stars didn’t actually pen the pieces, their ghostwriters captured a crucial sentiment of emotional closeness. An introduction to Fabian’s confession reads:

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114 These pieces come from *16 Magazine*, November, 1961.
I hope that when you get through reading these words that come from the depth of my heart and mind, you will feel a lot closer to me, and that you will feel you know and understand me better than you did before.\footnote{“I confess…,” 16 Magazine, November, 1961.}

By making himself vulnerable to the young reader, Fabian’s fans might begin to better understand him as a comrade. Although these might have been stars, any young fan could immediately draw a parallel between their own personal relationships and those of the teen idol fraternity.

And wherever these young stars performed, they prompted outrageous responses from throngs of teenage fans. When Fabian appeared at Philadelphia’s Fox Theater in November of 1959, the approximately 8,000 people awaiting his arrival created a scene that seemed to baffle the Philadelphia Bulletin reporter in attendance. The throng of teenagers, “screamed, wept, shouted, applauded and pushed at the barricades set up on Market St. as the tall, handsome, 16-year-old singer arrived.”\footnote{Carol Gelber, “8,000 Fans Greet Fabian at Theater for Premiere,” Philadelphia Bulletin, November 12, 1959.} A Bulletin reporter covering a Fabian performance in June of the same year reported a similar phenomenon, as “the screechers in the bleachers went wild when Fabian made strange noises.”\footnote{John P. Shanley, “Dick Clark’s ‘The Record Years,’” Philadelphia Bulletin, June 29, 1959.} The sixteen-year-old singer was a perpetual celebration of youth, and as such Bandstand’s followers could identify with him in ways that they could not with Les Paul or the McGuire Sisters (who sang to less fanfare at the same Clark-hosted event). In a sense rock ‘n’ roll had become something of a mirror for teenagers, an apparatus through which they could see themselves and affirm their cultural autonomy. Jerry Lee Lewis and Frankie Avalon were not the only ones making “strange noises” anymore, as their fans echoed the squeals and moans with a similar set of outsider reverberations. It was this
symbolic call and response game between performer and viewer that confirmed rock ‘n’ roll as the musical banner of youth culture.

The Hop

And that banner did not exist solely as a matter of song, rock ‘n’ roll culture also promoted a set of exclusive teen spaces where adolescents could explore and develop their own norms. Local hang outs like the diner or soda fountain functioned as points of cultural transmission in many communities, but no teenage space related as closely to rock ‘n’ roll music as the record hop. Record hops were rock ‘n’ roll dances with the added incentive of live local disc jockeys. For teenagers the record hop was a definitively youth-oriented event, a place set apart by its music and the familiar dancing style associated with such a fast paced rhythm. No song better captured the youthful environs of the record hop, or perhaps even that entire era of rock ‘n’ roll culture, than the hit song “At the Hop” by a foursome called Danny and the Juniors. When the Juniors came to American Bandstand on December 2, 1957 to perform “At the Hop,” they were four local teenagers with little recognition outside the Philadelphia area. Less than a week later they would be well on their way to rock ‘n’ roll superstardom.

As performers, Danny and the Juniors exuded youth in a manner similar to Avalon or Fabian. With camera-friendly youngsters Danny Rapp as the lead, the Juniors looked like anyone’s clean-cut high school quartet. Musically the Juniors blended standard pop harmonizing with the sound of black street corner music, a standard white rock ‘n’ roll amalgamation of mainstream and outsider genres.118 “At the Hop” featured a fairly standard shuffle beat and a fast-paced piano to complement the vocal harmonics.

118 Jackson, 89-90.
The song was easy to dance to, built around a catchy melody, and lyrically infused with the resonances of youth culture. The words were almost a teenage code, a language only familiar to those who could conceivably pass through the record hop's front doors. As the song began, Rapp belted out:

Well, you can rock it, you can roll it, do the stomp and even stroll it, at the hop. / When the record starts a spinin' you chalypso and you chicken at the hop. / Do the dance sensation that is sweepin' the nation at the hop.

The references spoke to a national dance culture among young people who could communicate and express commonality through the physical language of steps. To an adult Rapp's fast-paced recitation of dances might have sounded like gibberish, but to a teenager they were the familiar phraseology of a segregated teenage space. The second verse expresses a similar theme as Rapp sang:

Well you can swing it, you can groove it, you can really start to move it, at the hop. Where the jockey is the smoothest and the music is the coolest at the hop. / All the cats and chicks can get their kicks at the hop.

Each of these verses alternated with the straightforward invitation of "let's go to the hop" repeated five times. This simple lyrical arrangement synthesized "At The Hop's" youthful appeal. The hop was the "coolest" space, a place where "cats and chicks," could practice their cultural autonomy. Rock 'n roll was a nebulously segregated teenage space, and the record hop was its physical manifestation.

As an astute observer of teenage trends, Dick Clark understood the power of the record hop. And although there is some debate over the accuracy of this story, some (Clark included) say it was the Bandstand host who convinced the songwriters to change the tune from "Do the Bop" to "At the Hop." A few months after Danny and the Juniors performed "At the Hop" for the first time on American Bandstand, the quartet

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\(^{119}\) See Clark, 174-75 and for contradicting sources see Jackson, 90.
returned to lip-synch the same number on an episode of *The Dick Clark Show*. On this occasion Danny and the Juniors provided a visual adjunct to their vocals. In the segment, the group performed the song from a raised platform overlooking a boardwalk. Dressed in crisp white beach shirts and matching khaki pants the foursome radiated youthfulness. Below them crowds of teenagers danced to the music on the wooden planks of the boardwalk, a throng of energetic young dance partners. In this moment the lyrical imagination of “At the Hop” received its theatrical life before a national television audience. Because youth is such a visual category, something so easily distinguished by physical appearance, this visual spectacle confirmed adolescence in an important new way. On the radio listeners could only imagine this drama, but on *American Bandstand* they could match the image to the sound. Here was the hop, the ultimate cross-section of teenage culture, celebrated for all to see.

Less than a month after Danny and the Juniors appeared on *American Bandstand*, “At the Hop” became the number one song in the country. On that same day, January 6, 1958, “Great Balls of Fire” also hit its peak position as the number two song on the pop music charts. In a sense they were songs at the opposite ends of the rock ‘n’ roll spectrum, singles that demonstrated the genre’s range and its transformative power. “Great Balls of Fire” came from a geographically and musically distant place, from a singer whose country swagger and outrageous antics marked him as definitively different. By comparison “At the Hop” came from *American Bandstand’s* backyard, from local kids who urban-suburban white teens could immediately recognize. “At the Hop”

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120 Coincidentally Chuck Berry appeared on the same episode.
showcased the ways in which teenagers could appropriate the “noises” of rock ‘n’ roll into the project of constructing their own outsider identity. “At the Hop” connected rock ‘n’ roll to a set of adolescent terms and segregated teenage spaces. This appropriation was made possible by the formulation of a teenage identity outside the nuclear unit, an identity open to countersuburban cultural inputs. But the process did not end there. Teenagers used rock ‘n’ roll to further define that separated nexus and craft it into a musical reflection of their own outsider status. On *American Bandstand* rock ‘n’ roll became a mirror for non-nuclear youth identity, a place where they could see themselves performing the distant worlds opened to them by the likes of Jerry Lee Lewis.

By the end of 1957, the once-clueless Clark already understood this process to an astonishing degree. Clark knew the allure of segregated youth spaces like the record hop, and he began to craft his new hit show in that image. With the help of producer Tony Mammarella and other creative forces at the ABC network, Clark turned the regional hit into a national phenomenon. Through the vehicle of *American Bandstand* Clark helped create the teenage hang out spot, the place where people “got it,” an imagined cross-section of every small-town soda fountain or record hop in America. In 1956 Clark seemed fairly oblivious to youth culture, but by 1957 he was busy constructing a fantasy land for the autonomous inclinations of America’s teenagers.
SECTION IV

Teenagers like Us: How Bandstand Projected Normalcy and Encoded Difference

In 1957, Clark’s level of access to the nation’s youth received a dramatic upgrade when ABC decided to put WFIL’s local hit into its syndicated afternoon line-up. Fifteen minutes before *American Bandstand* made its national debut on August 5, producer Tony Mammarella came to Dick Clark with one final piece of advice. “Don’t forget, it’s ‘American Bandstand,’” he said, “And the kids aren’t supposed to say what high school, just their name and age, pretend the show isn’t from Philly.”123 The change in title and protocol represented a huge departure for the show; one so drastic that Mammarella felt his star talent needed a last-second reminder. For the last five years *Bandstand* had been Philadelphia’s consummate television program, a show attached to the geographic limitations of Southeastern Pennsylvania in every way. So many aspects of *Bandstand*, from the set design to the actual routine of the broadcast, reinforced the show’s provinciality. Just a few short minutes from transcending those invisible barriers between youth and a national adolescent identity, Clark understandably needed a bit of coaching.

Thinking of teenagers as “our kids,” as boys and girls next doors, became a second-nature assumption for the local installment of *Bandstand*. Breaking that habit took a conscious effort by those in charge of *American Bandstand*’s creative direction. And as a result of this effort, the newly-nationalized *American Bandstand* became a prominent forum for a truly autonomous adolescent culture, one that drew the fragmented youth population into a malleable, national teenage consensus. A close examination of

123 Clark and Robinson, 9.
American Bandstand's programmatic procedure, its methods of presentation, and its points of emphasis, reveal the subtle ways in which the trendsetting show accomplished this task.

Changes in the set design constituted the most obvious shift in this direction toward a national scope. On the eve of the show's leap into national syndication, a set designer from ABC headquarters in New York visited the studio at 46th and Market to undress the symbols of regional identity. The designer removed the local high school pennants that had served as a visual focal point, replacing them with generic school banners that bore the names of faraway places like "Buffalo." Not only did local references stand to confuse a national audience, they erected a symbolic barrier between those watching and whatever images of youth the program showcased. The network designers hoped to avoid any assumption that a young Philadelphian embodied the category of teenager any more than other American youths. In the world of American Bandstand, adolescence operated independently of local networks or other, more general, categories of residence. For example, the new set fissured any links between the show and city living. Whereas the original backdrop for the host's podium featured a local record shop with a window looking out onto a skyscraper-clad city street, the new scenery piece included a wall of gold records and photographs of popular artists that appealed to any young person with a radio. No visual references to Philadelphia or the show's urban location remained.

In addition to removing particular elements of provinciality, the ABC outsiders also interjected various reminders of the show's new national scope. One of the new set pieces was a map of America known as the "big board." Instead of roadways or rivers, 124 This fact is recalled in Clark's autobiography. Clark and Robinson, 3.
the map included a dot for every ABC affiliate that broadcast the program. When Clark referenced a certain city, which he would often do when talking about where a letter-writer came from or where a song enjoyed the most popularity, the camera often cut away to a close-up of that affiliate on the big board. Beyond being just a thrill for those watching from that location, the big board served as a visual reinforcement of the sentiment that young people from all over the country had some part in contributing to the show’s content. In a similar vein, a sparkle-encrusted cut-out of America also took on a prominent role in the new set design. Starting with that inaugural national telecast, the show opened with the theme song “Bandstand Boogie” and a shot of teenagers dancing inside the map’s cut out. Each show ended with credits rolling over a similar image. It was the perfect visual complement for a show promoting itself as America’s dance party. The introductory shot sequence confirmed a sense of interrelatedness between the teenagers dancing on the show and those dancing along in living rooms across the country. Through this star-spangled window the distinction between viewer and participant became less obvious, an effect that reinforced supra-provinciality.

Beyond these visual cues, Dick Clark also adapted his on-screen rhetoric to the show’s national outreach. As alluded to earlier, Clark immediately ceased inquiring about local high schools when interviewing studio participants. Instead, Clark sought out teenage visitors from other parts of the country and interviewed them on camera. For example, in a typical 1957 episode Clark interviewed a pair of twins from Minneapolis along with two teenagers from New York City, asking each about their hometown and what records teenagers enjoyed most in those parts of the country. 125 These frequent

asides with visitors reinforced the show’s broad appeal. Clark also made sure to note where each letter-writer hailed from when he opened fan mail on camera. A 7-Up opener from Long Island or an elephant figurine from Green Bay was as much about the show’s nationwide fan base as it was about the significance of the gift.\footnote{Examples taken from Ibid.} On December 17, 1957 Clark read a particularly interesting letter on air. He told the assembled:

> A note here from Jeanine Papano who lives in Oklahoma. She says a few weeks ago KTEN, our station, threatened to take off Bandstand and the response was so tremendous that KTEN was almost afraid to take station breaks. They tried to start a local wingy-do but that apparently did not succeed. I’m awful glad to hear that we’re back with you.....\footnote{Dick Clark. 1957. \textit{American Bandstand}. television program. Philadelphia: ABC Television, December 17.}

This letter stands out for a couple of reasons. First, it highlights the negative associations attached to \textit{American Bandstand} in some communities. The effort to create a “local wingy-do” signifies a sort of adult attempt to bring the show back into a controllable, localized domain of parental authority. Second, Clark’s mention of the letter writer’s home state emphasizes the geographic element of this conflict between familial authority and adolescent independence. \textit{American Bandstand} insisted that teenagers everywhere have the right to engage with one another, to transcend regional networks. The struggle for freedom of expression in Oklahoma related, through the lens of \textit{American Bandstand}, to a much broader process. \textit{American Bandstand’s} focus on the teenager as a national phenomenon helped create a youth culture that transcended the family.

That sense of connectivity fostered a national conversation between teenagers, a dialogue that took place through the symbols of youth culture. Tangible aspects of the show such as dress, dance, and music all took on a dimension of geographic interconnectedness through the optic of \textit{American Bandstand}. In particular, the program...
became a focal point of exchange for teenage dancing fads. Richard Spada, an ardent 
Bandstand fan who grew up in Connecticut, notes that teenagers in the New York 
suburbs had a noticeably different dancing style than those from a metropolitan area as 
close as Philadelphia. As Spada explains, the unifying power of American Bandstand 
supplanted such regional fractionalization. He recalls, “As far as dance, I would say 
American Bandstand...set the standard...That [was] the correct way, because [they] were on television.” Dances like the Chalypso, the Stroll, the Hand Jive, and the Twist received a measure of official codification through their on-screen performance. The camera work on American Bandstand enhanced this effect by frequently splicing shots of teenage dancers with prolonged close-ups of their feet. The cameras provided viewers with an informal tutorial, focusing on the quick movements of regimented dance steps like the Jitterbug. It was a televised invitation to dance along with the program, to dance the “correct” way, to dance the teenage way. In the context of American Bandstand’s national scope, this invitation went out to every affiliate on the big board, to every adolescent inside that glittery cut-out. As Spada points out, teenagers accepted this invitation in earnest.

It is important to note that within this national dialogue was a smaller, more local cultural transmission of styles that served as a foundation for the dance fads of the late 1950s. Carole Scaldeferri, a dancer on the show in the late 1950s and early 1960s, recalls that the Philadelphia style of dancing featured prominently on the show was itself an amalgamation of styles from around the city. She says, “If you were from North Philly

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128 “In New York and Connecticut, the teenagers, we danced different...We would try to copy [the Bandstand] dance.” Richard Spada in Carole Scaldeferri and Richard Spada, interview by Avi Wolfman-Arent, February 15, 2010.
129 Interview with Scaldeferri and Spada.
you danced different then West Philly. If you were from South Philly you danced a little
different. All the areas, the neighborhoods, just like the slang is...it’s the same way with
the dancing."\textsuperscript{130} Despite almost ubiquitous residential segregation in Philadelphia at the
time, dance became a mode of conversation amongst youth. Scaldeferri remembers that
she borrowed many of her own dance techniques from the “black girls in the locker
room” who had a style that she considered “more free.”\textsuperscript{131} For Scaldeferri, dance became
a way of crossing the city’s barriers of ethnic and racial segregation. Dance historian Tim
Wall confirms that shows like \textit{American Bandstand}, and the dances transmitted on these
programs, “extended the possibilities for cultural exchange and did create a form of youth
culture that at some level cut across racial lines.”\textsuperscript{132} These local occurrences of cultural
conduction refute the common assumption that national dance crazes were simply
manufactured, meaningless byproducts of the pop music industry.\textsuperscript{133}

In another sense, the rise of dancing fads demonstrates the ultimate triumph of a
non-regional teenage identity on \textit{American Bandstand}. Out of these local cultural
exchanges emerged a nationally recognized dancing norm. Whether the dance came from
West Philadelphia or San Jose, \textit{American Bandstand} turned the steps into a cultural
template for other teenagers to copy. This collective energy underscored the notion of
adolescence outside regional networks, a teenager unbounded by provinciality. In the
paradigm of \textit{American Bandstand} all symbols of youth culture could inhabit this sense of
trans-regional continuity. The music belonged to everybody, the dance belonged to
everybody, and the clothing belonged to everybody. Even the bleachers where the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{130} Interview with Scaldeferri and Spada}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{131} Interview with Scaldeferri and Spada}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{132} Wall, 190.}
\end{footnotes}
dancers sat between songs can be imagined in this context as a symbolic representation of the national teenage consensus. When they applauded or laughed or screamed, they performed a sort of teenage instant poll, a visual finger on the pulse of youth.

**Rock ‘n’ Roll Politics**

And as a national identity, the teenager began to acquire a pseudo-political dimension. In the arena of *American Bandstand* this politicized youth culture manifested itself as a derivate of teenage choice. Clark skillfully weaved democratic mechanisms into the show’s protocol, molding the show into a platform for youth voice. One of the most prominent examples of this participatory impulse was, in fact, a carryover from the Bob Horn era. Horn initiated a regular installment on the show known as the rate-a-record segment. During rate-a-record Horn, and later Clark, would assemble four audience members on the dance floor to listen to a new song. After the song played, three of the teenage participants would give the record a numerical rating between 35 and 98, with higher numbers indicating greater favor. The fourth participant would then average the scores in order to create a final rating. If the adolescent arbiters enjoyed the tune, they would often utter some permutation of the phrase, “I’ll rate it a 92 because it’s got a great beat and you can dance to it.” The phrase became indelibly associated with *American Bandstand*, a cultural artifact attached to the show’s promotion of youth choice. Beyond mere kitsch, the segment became a forum for adolescent autonomy, a space where youth could independently determine their collective likes and dislikes.

As an adjunct to rate-a-record, Clark and Mammarella changed the name of the program’s top 10 list to the “*American Bandstand* Teen-Age Top 10” after the show went
network.\textsuperscript{134} In the same vein as rate-a-record, Clark promoted the new top 10 as a genuine expression of teenage musical taste. He wrote in his 1977 autobiography, "The 'American Bandstand' top tunes list is the authentic list, because you let us know through the mail, you write to us..."\textsuperscript{135} Clark highlighted the pluralistic aspect of Bandstand's list, a barometer that responded exclusively to the teenage body politic. As Clark pointed out, the "American Bandstand Teen-Age Top 10" often featured different songs than those found on standard lists such as Billboard and Variety.\textsuperscript{136} These discrepancies spoke to youth who felt marginalized by the adult-controlled industry publications, who felt that Billboard and Variety somehow did not respect or respond to the teenage voice.

Teenagers responded to the prospect of this unfiltered outlet with great enthusiasm.

Clark employed similar rhetoric for a teenage fan poll he conducted late in 1957. Known as the "American Bandstand poll of popularity," Clark advertised the contest as "probably the biggest poll of its kind to be conducted."\textsuperscript{137} These claims reinforced the sentiment that American Bandstand was the only national mouthpiece for teenagers. The write-in competition included seven categories for young fans to judge: most popular male singer, most popular female singer, most promising female singer, most promising male singer, best vocal group, best small group, and best record of 1957. The winners received a silver record, along with the coveted affirmation of a growing youth demographic. Just as the Bandstand top 10 served as an alternative to Billboard, Variety, and Cashbox, the "American Bandstand poll of popularity" constituted an independent avenue for teenage opinion. For a group that increasingly saw itself as geographically

\textsuperscript{134} Clark and Robinson, 69.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 69-70.
diverse and culturally autonomous, *American Bandstand*'s ability to integrate mechanisms of choice into the program provided teens with a coveted opportunity to create an independent cultural nexus. In these participatory forums one can see a primitive outline of the teenage body politic taking shape, a larger sense that adolescents had their own ways of viewing the world and interacting with popular culture.

The presence of a teenage voice in *American Bandstand* also came across quite literally through the show's presentation. The daily, hour and a half spectacle had a feeling of spontaneity, creating a teen-friendly environment where teens could shout out their approval during one of Clark's monologues or laugh out loud during his improvised attempts at humor. There was no laugh track or applause sign, and the intermittent interjections made the presence of teenage energy all the more palpable. *Bandstand* was the place where teenagers could voice their emotions at any juncture, where self-expression seemed relatively unrestrained. Those voices generally came from a group of recognized dancers who showed up on a daily basis. Clark and Mammarella picked out a cadre of daily dancers to serve on the *Bandstand* committee, a privilege that allowed them to skip the long line outside the studio. These committee members eventually became known simply as “the regulars,” and they would become both the teenage face of the program and the enabling agents in a very revealing interaction between *American Bandstand* and its young fans.

The Regulars
The idea for a committee of regular dancers actually started under Bob Horn who initially observed that fans developed a special affinity for teenagers they recognized. Once the show entered syndication, that affinity turned into a full-scale onslaught of frenzied adoration. Local teenagers like Arlene Sullivan, Carole Scaldeferri, Bob Clayton, Kenny Rossi, Barbara Levick, Billy Cook, Carmen and Yvette Jimenez, and Justine Carrelli became household names, each with multiple national fan clubs and mailboxes that collected thousands of letters every week. Their faces appeared on magazines alongside teen idols such as Frankie Avalon and Fabian. In his autobiography, Clark said of the regulars’ phenomenal popularity, “People sat at home and fantasized about these kids... We gave the viewers just enough information without really saying anything, so they could do their own little mind trips.” Although Clark probably overestimates his own agency in the creation of the regulars, his sentiment seems fairly accurate. The regulars provoked such a passionate response because they formed an accessible and believable community of teenagers. They, and only they, could act out the intimate details of youth on the grand stage of television.

In this televised enclave of adolescence, every regular played a role that reflected the typical range of characters found in any friend group or high school classroom. There were the jocks, the strong and sensitive types, the dressed-down beauties, even the nerdier archetypes. Fans knew Carole Scaldeferri as the show’s fashion plate, often writing in to ask Carole where she got her clothes. Dave Frees remembers regular Franni Giordano as a prankster. He recalls, “I used to call her the Lucille Ball of

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139 Clark and Robinson, 75
140 Interview with Arlene Sullivan and Interview with Scaldeferri and Spada.
American Bandstand because she was the clown.” And as viewers began to create these imagined typecasts for their favorite teenage stars, the ascribed roles became a mirror for teenage life.

The reflective nature of this community of regulars comes across in the ways that popular magazines chose to frame the youngsters. These monthly publications gave readers an intimate look into the lives of the regulars so that fans could more easily identify with the dancers as people from their own lives, or even rough representations of themselves. Inside the fold of 16 Magazine and Teen Screen, fans could find regulars dealing with normal teenage problems, expressing their likes and dislikes, and interacting with each other. A 16 Magazine exclusive called “Your Secret Bandstand Album” featured profiles of all of the program’s most popular dancers, complete with the dancers’ weight, height, eye color, closest friends, favorite singer, favorite food, ideal date, and life ambition. In another exclusive entitled the “Bandstand Regulars Tell All...About Us,” the magazine presented columns by the regulars about the many trials of adolescence. They ranged from the more light-hearted dilemmas such as “How to Give a Swinging Party” by Sue and Mary Beltrante or “The Neighborhood Hangout: Good or Bad?” by Betty Romantini, to the more serious issues of “How to Break Off with your Steady” by Justine Carrelli or “How I Overcame my Shyness,” by Carmen Jimenez. Although adults at the magazine actually wrote the articles, these more intimate portraits of dancers, only added to a sense that the viewers truly knew their on-screen parallels. Fans particularly enjoyed the moments in which viewers could see the regulars interacting with one another. A number of well-known dating couples emerged from the

141 Interview with Dave Frees.
142 “Your Secret Bandstand Album”
pack of committee members, such as Bob Clayton and Justine Carrelli, and Kenny Rossi and Arlene Sullivan. Just as each individual represented a certain teenage typecast, these couples came to symbolize the ups and downs of a teenage relationship. When they danced together fans gushed, when they didn’t fans wrote in with an almost-obsessive sense of urgency.\textsuperscript{143} The back of \textit{16 Magazine} featured a gossip column about the regulars by fellow dancer Judy Leibowitz. In the piece Leibowitz talked about who danced with who, who was seen talking to another regular, and what relationships might be on the fritz.\textsuperscript{144} It was the sort of rambling monologue that teens could instantly distinguish as a print representation of lunch room banter. The drama captured the attention of adolescent viewers, leading them even deeper into a world they could recognize as their own.

In this project of building a community of regulars, \textit{American Bandstand} aptly captured the microcosm of teenage life by creating an imagined ideal. The regulars became cast as an exceedingly normal bunch, a group so normal that teenagers could live vicariously through them. And in a sense they were, as Arlene Sullivan recalls, everyday adolescents. She says:

\begin{quote}
You gotta understand [the fans] were just like us, they identified with us. We were the same, we weren’t movie stars, we weren’t professional dancers, we were amateurs. They were\textit{ just} like us. They had boyfriends and they wanted to dress like us, they wanted to dance like us.\textsuperscript{145}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{143} Interview with Arlene Sullivan.
\textsuperscript{145} Interview with Arlene Sullivan.
The show and its supplementary magazines simply identified the incredible power of this age-based kinship and enhanced it.\footnote{With the rise of reality television this technique is now far more common. Arlene Sullivan remarked that \textit{American Bandstand} might well be considered the first reality television show, the first to capture the allure of self-identification through visual media.} As the regulars acted out their teenage lives on cameras, America’s youth pantomimed them. It was a ritual way of performing the intricacies of youth and determining what exactly this new category of teenager meant to its denizens. By casting the regulars as normal teenagers, \textit{American Bandstand} could fit this microcosm of adolescent life into the larger-scale emergence of a national youth culture. Even the term “regulars” suggested a sentiment of normalcy and applicability. Because the regulars were “just like us,” any teenager anywhere could adapt the fantasy to their own personal context. Outwardly, nothing about the regular seemed to prohibit such imaginary indulgences. \textit{American Bandstand}’s normal teenagers became an almost perfectly malleable ideal for the growing and increasingly self-referential network of youth.

Under this guise of normalcy, however, there existed many layers of difference. As Arlene Sullivan recalls, “All those kids that went on that show were from different neighborhoods, around the city and we were all loners...So when we got together we became one close unit.”\footnote{Interview with Arlene Sullivan.} They were the quiet kids, the ones who liked to dance, or felt like they never quite fit in with the neighborhood crowd. The hidden truth defied their public images as paragons of teenage-hood. In a subtle way, their personal isolation reveals the extent to which teenage identity referenced a sense of outcast identity. In fact, this projected ordinariness became a way of coding outsider inputs through the mechanism of \textit{American Bandstand}. 

\textsuperscript{146}
A Teenage Family

These differences came across in many forms, one of the most obvious being the last names of the regulars themselves. Surnames like Scaldeferri, Rossi, Giordano, Sullivan, Levick, and Carelli, reveal that many of the most popular teens on the show came from the white ethnic enclaves of Philadelphia. Sullivan came from a predominantly Irish-American neighborhood in South Philadelphia while Scaldeferri grew up in an Italian section of West Philadelphia. By extension, the teenage ideal could be Italian, Jewish, or Irish, not necessarily a regurgitation of blond-haired, blue-eyed conventions. This was something of a novelty for late 1950s Philadelphia, a city still starkly divided along ethnic lines. In an interview with historian John Jackson, Rick Lewis, the black lead singer of the singing group the Silhouettes, noted the intense discrimination against Italians in Philadelphia. He recalled, “People looked down on you if you were Italian. If you were Italian, shit, you were almost a nigger!” And although this conflation of racial and ethnic differences might seem extreme to a modern observer, many historians note important parallels between white ethnic divides and racial divides during the early part of the 20th century. As Jackson notes, this transformation from outsider to mainstream seemed quite remarkable to older members of these white ethnic groups. He writes, “It was difficult to imagine that the grandparents of these new darlings of America had been ostracized and berated by the same country that now fawned over their descendants.” Undoubtedly the category of youth helped enable such a

148 Jackson, 33.
150 Jackson, 71.
metamorphosis in public attitudes. When teenagers said that they wanted to see people “like them” on television, that request referred specifically to people who could appropriate the teenage identity. Other distinctions became secondary in the paradigm of this age-centric division. By the simple virtue of looking young and dancing to rock ‘n’ roll music, many Italian, Irish, and Jewish Philadelphians took the leap from “them” to “us” through the imagined teenage constituency of American Bandstand.

Beyond these superficial differences, American Bandstand also served as a conduit for more subterranean outsider impulses. In particular, the show’s use of dance as a central visual element helped transmit an implicit sense of sexual nonconformity. As historian Tim Wall points out, the dance fads of the late 1950s and early 1960s “mark a significant break from the social etiquette that had governed social dance up until the 1950s.”\textsuperscript{151} Dances like The Twist, The Madison, and The Pony, infused with a series of suggestive hip gyrations, broke the ballroom mold of a bygone era. In the 1950s, when, as Dick Clark put it, “we just didn’t deal with sex,” dance became a way of encoding suppressed sexual ambitions.\textsuperscript{152} The connection between sexuality, dance, and teen culture was not merely coincidental. As Wall puts it, “these changes represented shifts in cultural attitudes and identity associated with postwar youth culture.”\textsuperscript{153} In particular, the creation of a non-nuclear teenage made these sexualized developments in social dance a distinct possibility.

According to Wall, another important development in the late 1950s materialization of dance fads was a growing approbation of individualism. As Wall puts it, there emerged a “shifted emphasis... away from the couple orientations of most of

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\textsuperscript{151} Wall, 194.
\textsuperscript{152} Clark and Robinson, 81.
\textsuperscript{153} Wall, 194.
twentieth-century dance up to that point." On *American Bandstand* that transition took place in front of millions of teenagers. A typical episode from December of 1957 showed teenager dancers in a formal, coupled alignment during slower songs, juxtaposed against the less restrictive modes of dance that took place during faster-paced rock ‘n’ roll numbers. During a ballad by Joni James teenage couples danced to cheek-to-cheek, a propriety that disintegrated quickly when “Raunchy” by Bill Justis played. As the pace quickened the very concept of partners became more and more muddled. Girls danced opposite of other girls on camera, and groups of three of four teenagers could be seen dancing in a vaguely cohesive circle. It was an obvious rejection of the male/female binary that served as the bedrock of the nuclear family unit. Because *American Bandstand* had a policy of alternating slow songs and fast songs, young viewers could follow this transformation every day and dance along at home.

In singer Chubby Checker’s original recording of “The Twist,” the song that spurred the dancing craze by the same name, his lyrics revealed the symbolic power of this growing individualism. While he shook his hips, Checker wailed, “Daddy’s sleepin’ and mama ain’t around / We’re gonna twist and twist and twist / ‘Til we tear the house down.” In the image of a falling house Checker symbolically suggested the emergence of a teenage identity that lay outside the nuclear family structure. The Twist was an almost perfect metaphor for the function of dance as a subversive force, a ritual that chipped away at the liberal consensus and its reliance on domestic understandings of the self. When teenagers did the twist they danced alone for the first time, opening up a world of untapped sexual potential.

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154 Wall, 196.
155 December 2, 1957 broadcast of *American Bandstand*.
Furthermore, the breakdown of a partner-based system implicitly entertained the possibility of a homosexual encounter. Indeed, under the hetero-normative surface of *American Bandstand* an entire subculture of homosexuality existed among the dancers.\(^{156}\) According to Arlene Sullivan’s estimate, roughly seventy percent of the regular male dancers were gay. Remarkably, the other teenagers on the show knew about the sexual orientations of their friends, and within the world of *Bandstand* a small community of gay teenagers emerged. As Sullivan explains, these open expressions of homosexuality never caused a cleavage amongst the regulars. For youth more interested in the similarities encapsulated by adolescence, such differences seemed trivial. As Sullivan says, “we’re all family now, who cares?”\(^{157}\) Of course they were not a family in the nuclear sense, but rather a family forged by a teenage subversion of that very concept.

And although Dick Clark did not acknowledge these non-normative sexual practices on the air, the sexually-accented realm of dance ensured that these resonances of homosexuality reached the audience. *American Bandstand* did not just coincidentally attract gay males; its focus on social dance made it a safe environment for teenagers to express a sexuality they otherwise could not access. David Román, an English professor at USC, talks about the power of dance in this regard. In his own life, Román remembers that dancing “was a way for me to begin choreographing my own movements through the world as an openly gay man. I loved dancing because it gave me a way to be in my body and to be around gay people in a way that was very new for me.”\(^{158}\) For the dancers on *Bandstand* and the show’s young viewers, a similar opportunity presented itself. Through

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\(^{156}\) The presence of many homosexual dancers is confirmed by Scaldeferri, Frees, and Sullivan.

\(^{157}\) Interview with Arlene Sullivan.

the show's celebration of dance they could explore the hidden reaches of their sexuality. On *American Bandstand* they were simply teenagers dancing in a manner that allied them with other people in their age group, but through that identity they could brush against undiscovered worlds.

Many historians tend to argue that the show's television-friendly format subsumed these resonances of difference and rendered them beyond recognition. They claim that the show whitened black music, made non-threatening white people out of ethnic others, and turned the sexual nonconformity of dance into a benign puppet of youth consumerism. Such historical dismissals do not account for the latitude of difference made possible by the show's endorsement of a non-nuclear teenage identity. Although *American Bandstand* did project an air of normalcy, that ordinariness became a way of encoding outsider inputs. These close encounters with the other became part of the teenage identity construction project, and this intersection infused youth culture with the substantive marks of non-normative worlds. The aftershocks of this intersection can be best seen through short, but revealing biography of *Bandstand* super fan Dave Frees.

**Dancing Frees**

Frees hails from Mohnton, Pennsylvania, a small farming community outside of Reading. The remoteness of his upbringing prevented more immediate contact with other youths, but through *American Bandstand* Frees could escape to a place much grander than his one-stop-light town. As he remembers, *Bandstand's* regulars were, "like your whole set of friends...You could have a rotten day in school and come home and watch..."
Born into a working-class family with an absentee father, Frees certainly had his share of rotten days. When *American Bandstand* came on he could escape the responsibilities of being the man of the house and immerse himself in the mask of teenage identity. His geographic isolation seemed to dissipate in the national network of adolescence he could find on his television set every afternoon. Because he shared the bond of age with the dancers on the show, he could immediately recognize them as friends regardless of their background. Although Frees remembers his father as a man steeped in prejudice, such distinctions made little sense to him in the context of adolescence. Frees remembers that he immediately took to the Jimenez sisters, the only set of Hispanic dancers on the show, a fact that he had to hide from his father. The Jimenez sisters were like him in the only way that mattered.

For Frees, who has “been dancing since [he] could stand,” *Bandstand* also became a place where he could participate in a cherished past time without experiencing any ridicule. It wasn’t until he got home to watch *American Bandstand* that he could defy those social taboos. Many years later Frees came out as a homosexual. But before that self-recognition, *Bandstand* served as a sanctuary for Frees. It became the place where he could physically express that hidden identity. Dancing in his living room in rural Mohnton, Pennsylvania, Dave Frees experienced a sort of entrancing taste of freedom. Today Frees describes his interaction with *Bandstand*, as both a viewer and fan club president, as one that has made him more “worldly.” The word choice reveals quite a bit about *Bandstand*, namely its

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159 Interview with Dave Frees.
160 Ibid.
161 Ibid.
162 Ibid.

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ability to expose youth to the cultural inputs of other worlds through the autonomous identity of the teenager. From the world he was born into, in a tiny rural town, Frees could reach into places almost impossibly far from his physical inheritance. In the national network of youth culture such intellectual extension seemed possible. Frees now lives in Reading, a town that his brother and mother consider too busy and urban. But Frees can handle the faster pace of city life because of his worldliness, and he can enter spaces, both physical and imagined, that his mother and father could not.

Frees story underscores the fact that Bandstand did not completely nullify resonances of difference. In sometimes invisible ways, American Bandstand gave teenagers a way to access that difference when no alternative existed. On American Bandstand people as biographically diverse as Dave Frees, Arlene Sullivan, Georgie Woods, Dick Clark, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roger Clipp, Chuck Berry, and Frankie Avalon shared a brief but important window of overlap. Youth culture bought these lives to a point of creative collision, and changed the way each thought about age and identity. Through this process, the teenager became something much more than an empty space between childhood and adulthood. The teenager emerged as an identity shaded with difference, one which left youth with a very distinct understanding of themselves in the world. The power and voice granted to teenagers through Bandstand turned into a more pervasive idea that youth had a special perspective, an understanding of the world that their elders did not possess. As Tony Mammarella’s reminder to Dick Clark portended, these adolescents were not Philadelphia’s kids anymore. They belonged to something much larger.
CONCLUSION

An Open Letter:
Youth Moves into the Future

That larger something underwent a final stage of metamorphosis in the early 1960s as the non-nuclear teenage identity began to manifest itself in increasingly political ways. From the nebulous concept of an autonomous teenage culture, the sort of concept promoted vigorously on American Bandstand, emerged what I call a teenage body politic. The teenage body politic is, in essence, the imagined community of adolescents bound together by age and age only. Implicit in it are some semblance of shared values, circumstances, desires, and public expressions. By adopting a generational identity tied to the public image of the teenager, postwar youth joined a group with different parameters of inclusion. Belonging became a matter of age rather than a matter of race, gender, or sexuality. This is not to say that the teenager eradicated any of the nefarious "isms" associated with such exclusionary identities, but it did necessarily expose the teenager to certain marginalized groups and lifestyles. This moment of exposure should not be overlooked. In the microcosm of American Bandstand, teenagers encountered African-American and working class music in the form of rock and roll, the latent sexuality of dancing, and an undercurrent of homosexuality expressed through dancing culture. In the past such an intersection of lifestyles may not have been possible. But for a community united by youth, these subaltern influences were not inherently excluded.

This union of age transformed into a feeling that the young people understood their world in ways that their adult counterparts did not, and that those same youth had a
mission to parlay that vision into action. The resonances of this transformation can be seen in the youth political movements of the 1960s. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a vanguard group for the nexus of young activists known as the New Left, expressed this politicization of youth in their foundational document. Written in 1962 and known as the Port Huron Statement, SDS began their call to change with the following, “We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.”\textsuperscript{163} This focus on youth served as a rallying point throughout the piece, as SDS repeatedly sought to place their struggle within the collective timeline of their generational memory. Phrases such as: “When we were kids the United States was the wealthiest and strongest country in the world...,” or, “Our work is guided by the sense that we may be the last generation in the experiment with living,” or, “Since our childhood these two trends—the rise of the military and the installation of a defense-based economy—have grown fantastically...,” all indicate a sense of duty attached to youth.\textsuperscript{164}

It is important to note, however, that this politicization of youth was not a partisan process. Although many historians focus on the connections between youth culture and the New Left, young people on the right also embraced the teenage body politic.\textsuperscript{165} The Young Americans for Freedom, a conservative activist group formed in 1960, captured a sentiment similar in the Sharon Statement, their foundational text. They proclaimed, in this first line of the statement, “In this time of moral and political crises, it is the responsibility of the youth of America to affirm certain eternal truths. We, as young

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 298, 299, and 302 respectively.
conservatives, believe...”166 Beginning with this premise, YAF then proceeded to spell out their ideological commitments. This opening declaration captures much of what is meant by the idea of a teenage body politic. The idea that youth had some “responsibility” to fix society, and that their unique understanding of the world related exclusively to their particular place as a generation set apart. YAF and SDS shared this political exceptionalism in common, and political expressions of youth from both ends of the spectrum challenged the liberal consensus of the era.167 As a generation forged outside the nuclear family unit it is no surprise that youths looked unfavorably on a liberal consensus that held domesticity as a central tenet. In the official proclamations of SDS and YAF one can see the culmination of an outsider identity turned political, a teenager that now understood itself as uniquely positioned in the world.

This is to say that the teenager, as an identity defined and contextualized on American Bandstand, was a precondition for the youth activism of the 1960s. Far from benignity or unrelenting inauthenticity, American Bandstand actually helped create an oppositional youth voice. In an interview with ABC anchor Peter Jennings, political activist Julian Bond said of watching the show, “I remember feeling this tremendous feeling of confirmation that I belonged to a group of people called ‘teenager’ and we have our own music.”168 Bond would carry that formative understanding of inclusiveness into a long career on the front lines of America’s civil rights movement. What began as teenage “confirmation” turned into a more fully formed notion that baby boomers had some generational will, some broad destiny bound up in their group identity.

166 Ibid., 305.
167 Ibid., 304.
Ever the astute observer and open-minded opportunist, Dick Clark attempted to capture this shift in the social meaning of youth. Just as he observed and reinforced the creation of a non-nuclear teenage identity through the apparatus of *American Bandstand* in 1957, one decade later Clark now watched as that generational bond crept into the political realm. In 1967 Clark released a single called “An Open Letter to the Older Generation,” a sort of implicit recognition of the youth body politic by the man known as America’s “Oldest Living Teenager.” The song was a response to “An Open Letter to My Teenage Son,” a top-ten spoken-word recording from right-wing radio personality Victor Lundberg. Set to the tune of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” Lundberg’s recording ended with the purposefully provocative line, “If you decide to burn your draft card, then burn your birth certificate at the same time. From that moment on, I have no son.”

In “An Open Letter to The Older Generation” Clark struck back at those who dismissed or discredited the political expressions of youth. He opens the song, also performed in the spoken-word style, with a piano riff and the line, “The music that you’re hearing is the sound of the teens.” Clark then continues with a laundry list of ways in which adults try to construct youth nonconformity as necessarily evil or as some generational failure. Over the rock ‘n’ roll backbeat he speaks somberly, “Blame the kids for acid, blame the kids for pot...Blame the kids for hippies and for bummer trips and for dropping out and turning on and on and ON and ON...Blame the kids, blame the kids.” Finally, after building this one-sided case against teenagers Clark turns the tables and exposes adult hypocrisy in a climactic crescendo. He says:

> Who is so afraid of youth my friends? My friend it’s you and I. They scare us with their questions, with what they want to know. Our answers aren’t gospel just

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because we say it’s so. And oh the mess we’ve made of things and how can we deny it? They search for their solution although they know we’ll never try it. They’re not afraid to protest, free speech begs they should. When they shout that “war is bad” and we shout, “No, it’s good.” We cry, “Unpatriotic.” And then as if to make us fools, they go and fight and die and leave young blood in foreign pools. And those who live come back to us forgiving and unbowed. Embrace your sons and daughters now! America, be proud.

With that demand Clark’s voice echoes and the music fades away. It is a shockingly blunt and combative piece for a man commonly envisioned as wholesome, unthreatening, and (yes) inauthentic. One could dismiss the recording as simply another attempt by Clark to profit off of youth culture, but such a dismissal misses the song’s historical significance. In 1958 Clark emboldened teenagers through the comparatively tame advances of “Dick Clark Speaking,” defending their right to listen to rock ‘n’ roll music and enjoy greater personal freedoms. Now he was defending their right to protest and question authority. He was still talking about the same group of people, but something had certainly changed.

And although the song never came close to the success of Lundberg’s release, it revealed the essence of that shift in American adolescence.\(^{170}\) The recording showed how interconnected youth culture and youth politics had grown, and how the emergence of the former perpetually informed the latter. As a song, “An Open Letter to an Older Generation” seemed to map the formation and transformation of teenage identity over the course of the last ten years. Here was the journey laid out in four minutes, a generational odyssey from the faraway sounds of difference to the creation of something verifiably separate and saturated with politically inclusive possibilities.

\(^{170}\) The most prominent of these other songs was “‘A Letter to Dad,’ credited to Every Father’s Teenage Son, which scraped the charts at No. 93.” Ibid.
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