

Community Education - Fall Quarter 2026

Course Title: History of Rock & Roll: From Chuck Berry to Nirvana

Instructor: Sam Busick

Email: sbusick@clark.edu



Course Description

Rock & roll was more than a new kind of music—it helped transform American culture. This three-session course traces the history of rock & roll from its roots in blues, gospel, country, and rhythm & blues through the birth of rock in the 1950s, the cultural revolution of the 1960s, the fragmentation and expansion of rock in the 1970s, and the rise of punk, alternative rock, and grunge. Along the way, we will explore the musicians, songs, technologies, and cultural changes that shaped rock history while examining larger questions about race, youth culture, rebellion, politics, sexuality, commercialism, and generational identity.

Course Schedule

Session 1: The Birth of Rock & Roll — 1940s–1963

Theme: How Black American music, country music, technology, and teenage culture created rock & roll

Part 1: Before Rock & Roll

- **Blues and the Great Migration**
- **Gospel and the Black church**
- **Rhythm & blues**
- **Country and western**
- **Jump blues and boogie-woogie**
- **The electric guitar**
- **Independent record labels and radio**
- **How segregation shaped the American music industry**

The Foundations

Key figures:

- **Robert Johnson**
- **Sister Rosetta Tharpe**
- **Muddy Waters**
- **Howlin' Wolf**
- **Louis Jordan**
- **Hank Williams**
- **Big Mama Thornton**
- **Fats Domino**

Essential question:

Who invented rock & roll?

Part 2: Rock & Roll Explodes — 1954–1959

A new generation of musicians combined existing musical traditions into something that sounded—and felt—different.

Key figures:

- **Chuck Berry**
- **Little Richard**
- **Elvis Presley**
- **Buddy Holly**
- **Jerry Lee Lewis**
- **Bo Diddley**
- **Carl Perkins**
- **Fats Domino**

The Sound of Early Rock

- **Guitar-driven music**

- **The backbeat**
- **Rhythm & blues influences**
- **Country influences**
- **Teen-oriented lyrics**
- **Dancing and sexuality**
- **The 45 RPM single**
- **AM radio**

Part 3: Why Adults Feared Rock & Roll

Rock challenged several boundaries at once:

- **Race**
- **Sexuality**
- **Generational authority**
- **Segregation**
- **Fashion**
- **Dancing**
- **Youth independence**

The emergence of the teenager as a distinct consumer and cultural identity helped turn rock & roll into a national phenomenon.

Part 4: Rock's First Crisis

By the end of the 1950s:

- **Elvis enters the Army**
- **Buddy Holly dies**
- **Little Richard leaves rock & roll**
- **Chuck Berry faces legal trouble**
- **Jerry Lee Lewis faces scandal**
- **Payola investigations hit radio**

Did rock & roll almost disappear?

Part 5: The Bridge to the 1960s

- Motown
- Girl groups
- Surf music
- The Brill Building
- Phil Spector and the "Wall of Sound"
- Folk music revival

Key figures:

- The Beach Boys
- The Supremes
- The Ronettes
- Ray Charles
- Sam Cooke
- Bob Dylan

Discussion Question

Was early rock & roll primarily a musical revolution, a racial revolution, or a youth rebellion?

Session 2: Rock Becomes a Revolution — 1964–1969

Theme: Rock & roll grows up and becomes the soundtrack of enormous cultural change

Part 1: The British Invasion

February 1964: The Beatles arrive in America.

Rock suddenly becomes an international phenomenon.

Key artists:

- The Beatles

- The Rolling Stones
- The Who
- The Kinks
- The Animals

Two Different Visions of Rock

The Beatles

- Pop craftsmanship
- Experimentation
- Expanding possibilities of the recording studio

The Rolling Stones

- Blues
- Rebellion
- Sexuality
- Anti-establishment image

Part 2: Bob Dylan and Folk Rock

Rock begins moving beyond teenage romance.

- Civil rights
- War
- Politics
- Social criticism
- Personal introspection

Key artists:

- Bob Dylan
- Joan Baez
- The Byrds
- Simon & Garfunkel

Part 3: Motown, Soul & Black America

Rock history cannot be separated from the history of Black American music.

Motown:

- **The Supremes**
- **Marvin Gaye**
- **The Temptations**
- **Stevie Wonder**
- **The Four Tops**

Soul:

- **Aretha Franklin**
- **Otis Redding**
- **James Brown**
- **Wilson Pickett**

Part 4: Psychedelic Rock & the Counterculture

By the mid-1960s, rock becomes deeply connected to the counterculture.

- **San Francisco**
- **Psychedelic drugs**
- **Eastern religion**
- **Anti-war movement**
- **Sexual revolution**
- **Communal living**
- **Experimental art**

Key artists:

- **The Grateful Dead**
- **Jefferson Airplane**
- **The Doors**

- Jimi Hendrix
- Janis Joplin
- Cream
- Pink Floyd

Part 5: The Album Becomes Art

Rock shifts from primarily a singles format toward albums conceived as complete artistic statements.

Landmark albums:

- *Rubber Soul*
- *Revolver*
- *Pet Sounds*
- *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*
- *Are You Experienced*
- *The Doors*

The Recording Studio Becomes an Instrument

- Multitrack recording
- Overdubbing
- Stereo
- Tape manipulation
- Effects
- Increasingly sophisticated production

Musicians were no longer limited to reproducing on stage what they could play live.

Part 6: 1967–1969 — The Peak and the Fracture

Key moments:

- Monterey Pop Festival
- Summer of Love

- Woodstock
- Altamont

Rock reaches enormous cultural influence—but the optimism surrounding the counterculture begins to fracture.

Discussion Question

Did rock music create the 1960s counterculture, or did the counterculture transform rock music?

Session 3: From Classic Rock to Grunge — 1970–1990s

Theme: Rock fragments into competing sounds, identities, and subcultures

Part 1: The End of the 1960s

By 1970:

- The Beatles break up
- Jimi Hendrix dies
- Janis Joplin dies
- Jim Morrison dies in 1971
- The counterculture fragments
- The music industry becomes increasingly corporate

Rock does not disappear.

It explodes into dozens of different directions.

Part 2: The Rise of Classic Rock

Hard rock:

- Led Zeppelin
- Deep Purple
- Black Sabbath
- Aerosmith

Singer-songwriters:

- **Carole King**
- **James Taylor**
- **Joni Mitchell**
- **Neil Young**

Southern rock:

- **The Allman Brothers Band**
- **Lynyrd Skynyrd**

Progressive rock:

- **Pink Floyd**
- **Yes**
- **Genesis**

Part 3: Rock Gets Bigger

The 1970s create the era of:

- **Arena rock**
- **Stadium concerts**
- **Massive tours**
- **FM radio**
- **Concept albums**
- **Elaborate stage productions**

Key artists:

- **Led Zeppelin**
- **Pink Floyd**
- **Fleetwood Mac**
- **Queen**
- **Eagles**
- **Bruce Springsteen**

Rock had begun as outsider music.

By the mid-1970s, rock was the establishment.

Part 4: Punk Blows It Up

Punk emerges partly as a reaction against increasingly polished and corporate rock.

Key artists:

- **Ramones**
- **Sex Pistols**
- **The Clash**
- **Patti Smith**
- **Television**

Punk's Message

Rock doesn't need:

- **Virtuosity**
- **Huge budgets**
- **Stadiums**
- **Twenty-minute songs**

It needs:

- **Energy**
- **Attitude**
- **Authenticity**
- **Three chords**

Part 5: Disco, Funk & the Changing Definition of Rock

The late 1970s also bring:

- **Disco**
- **Funk**
- **Reggae**

- Early hip-hop
- New Wave

Key artists:

- David Bowie
- Talking Heads
- Blondie
- Prince
- Bob Marley
- Parliament-Funkadelic

The boundaries separating musical genres become increasingly difficult to define.

Part 6: MTV Changes Everything

August 1, 1981: MTV launches.

Suddenly how musicians look becomes nearly as important as how they sound.

The MTV Generation

- Michael Jackson
- Madonna
- Prince
- Duran Duran
- Cyndi Lauper
- Bruce Springsteen

Part 7: The 1980s Rock Divide

Arena rock and metal:

- Van Halen
- Journey
- Def Leppard
- Bon Jovi

- Guns N' Roses

Alternative and college rock:

- R.E.M.
- The Cure
- The Smiths
- Sonic Youth
- Pixies

Two different futures of rock begin developing simultaneously.

Part 8: Seattle Changes Rock

By the late 1980s, an underground scene develops in the Pacific Northwest.

Seattle becomes the center of a reaction against:

- Glam metal
- Overproduction
- Rock-star excess
- Corporate image-making

Grunge

Key artists:

- Nirvana
- Pearl Jam
- Soundgarden
- Alice in Chains

The release of Nirvana's *Nevermind* in 1991 symbolizes a major generational change in popular music.

Part 9: Did Rock & Roll Die?

By the 1990s, hip-hop increasingly occupies the cultural position rock once held as the music of youth rebellion.

At the same time, rock fragments into:

- **Alternative**
- **Grunge**
- **Indie rock**
- **Pop-punk**
- **Metal**
- **Jam bands**
- **Britpop**

Rather than disappearing, rock becomes one part of a much larger musical landscape.

Final Discussion

- **Who actually invented rock & roll?**
- **Could rock have existed without Black American music?**
- **Why did rock become associated with rebellion?**
- **Which mattered more—the Beatles or the Rolling Stones?**
- **When did rock reach its creative peak?**
- **Did commercialization weaken rock or allow it to grow?**
- **Was punk a rejection of rock history or a return to its roots?**
- **Did Nirvana represent the last major rock revolution?**
- **Has hip-hop replaced rock as America's primary music of youth rebellion?**
- **What makes music "rock & roll" in the first place?**

The Historical Throughline

**Blues & Gospel → Rhythm & Blues → Rock & Roll → British Invasion → Folk Rock →
Psychedelia → Classic Rock → Punk → New Wave → Alternative → Grunge**

Rock & roll continually reinvents itself by rebelling against what came immediately before it.

Suggested Films/Clips

- ***The Girl Can't Help It* (1956)**

- **Elvis Presley on *The Ed Sullivan Show***
 - **The Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1964)**
 - ***Monterey Pop* (1968)**
 - ***Woodstock* (1970)**
 - ***Gimme Shelter* (1970)**
 - ***The Last Waltz* (1978)**
 - ***Stop Making Sense* (1984)**
 - **Nirvana — *MTV Unplugged* (1993)**
-

Class Evaluation

- Class evaluations are sent by email.
 - If you don't see it right away, check your **junk/spam folder**.
 - Evaluations are **anonymous** and come directly from Clark College.
 - If you don't receive one, contact:
 - Email: continuingeducation@clark.edu
 - Phone: 360-992-2939
-

Inclement Weather

- If the college closes due to weather, updates will appear at www.clark.edu
 - Community Education may also cancel classes independently if travel is unsafe.
 - If canceled, you will be notified by both phone and email.
 - Please check that your contact information is correct on the class roster.
-

More Classes

Looking for more Community Education courses? Visit: www.clark.edu/cce/