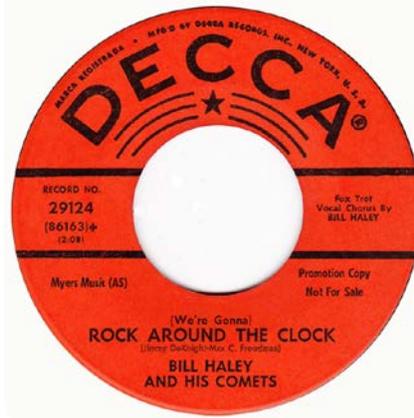


# “(We’re Gonna) Rock Around the Clock”—Bill Haley and His Comets (1954)

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Essay by David Deacon-Joyner (guest post)\*



The recording of Bill Haley and His Comets’ “Rock Around the Clock,” made on April 12, 1954, was not the first recording of “Rock Around the Clock,” nor was it Bill Haley’s first rock and roll record. It was, however, the seismic event that kicked off the rock revolution.

The song’s composition is attributed to Max C. Freedman (1893-1962) and Jimmy DeKnight (real name Jimmy Myers; 1919-2001), although Myers’ contribution to the song is questionable. The original, handwritten lead sheet, prepared by music copyist Harry Filler in early 1953, names only Freedman as both composer and lyricist. It also reveals a song quite different from what the Comets would record later. The opening countdown (“One, two, three o’ clock, four o’clock, rock”) is rendered as a verse, a standard device in Tin Pan Alley American popular song. It is also in a minor key, giving the song a dark flavor reminiscent of Yiddish theater songs. The second part of the song is a twelve-bar blues form in the major key that counts through the hours of gleeful “rocking.” The first half of the chorus steps up the scale, unlike the Haley version, and is, coincidentally, similar in melody and rhythm to Leroy Anderson’s “The Syncopated Clock.”

Jimmy Myers, publisher, promoter and Haley’s manager, gave the song to Haley at the time the latter was riding on the success of his recording of “Crazy Man, Crazy.” Haley tried it out in clubs in New Jersey to great acclaim, but he couldn’t get it recorded due to bad blood between Myers and Dave Miller, the owner of Essex Records and the label Haley was contracted with. “Rock Around the Clock” was then passed on to Tommy Dorsey Orchestra veteran Paschal Venniti, who had a combo called Sonny Dae and His Knights. Myers produced the recording session himself and it was released on Arcade Records to limited distribution. It was soon abandoned.

By April 1954, the Comets were released from their contract with Essex Records and signed with Decca. Their first session was on April 12<sup>th</sup>, produced by Milt Gabler. Most of their time was spent cutting the record's A-side, "Thirteen Women and Only One Man." With only 40 minutes left, they recorded "Rock Around the Clock" for the B-side, a tune Gabler considered a throwaway. What we hear on the recording is actually a composite of two takes. On the first take, the band overpowered Haley's vocal. On the second take, Gabler turned off every microphone except Haley's. The two takes were synchronized later and mixed onto a third tape.

Decca starting distributing the record on May 6. Soon, requests came pouring in to radio disc jockeys and music stores for the B-side song, "Rock Around the Clock." After a brief bubble, sales stalled out. That could have spelled the end of the song and the Comets' distinctive rendition of it, but it was about to take on new life and a new meaning.

In Hollywood, screenwriter and director Richard Brooks had taken on the assignment of adapting Evan Hunter's novel "Blackboard Jungle," a story about juvenile delinquents in a New York high school, into a movie. He stumbled across "Rock Around the Clock" on his car radio and decided to use it for the opening credits to set the tone for the scenes of untamed youth. Suddenly, the character of the song changed from a light-hearted tune about wholesome partying to an anthem for youthful rebellion. While the older generation was appalled at the movie's violence, the younger generation went nuts and "Blackboard Jungle" went from its intended B-movie status to a smashing success and the Bill Haley recording of "Rock Around the Clock" was its signature song. By July of 1955, it took the Number 1 spot in "Billboard's" ratings and sold over three million copies.

Bill Haley and His Comets were soon appearing on television variety shows on all three major networks. In early 1956, they began filming a movie for Columbia Pictures named for their hit song and the song once again blared through movie theater speakers to thrilled young audiences. Like "Blackboard Jungle," "Rock Around the Clock," the movie, generated outcries from the older establishment that only prompted the producers to generate a responding sequel entitled "Don't Knock the Rock," also featuring Haley and his band.

"Rock Around the Clock" had one more surge due to its placement in a movie. In 1973, filmmaker George Lucas made his pre-"Star Wars" landmark "American Graffiti," reflecting his experience as a teen growing up in early 1960s California. As with "Blackboard Jungle," "Rock Around the Clock" was heard in the opening credits. One of "American Graffiti's" stars, Ron Howard, went on to star in ABC Television's knock-off, "Happy Days." Not only was the song used again, but Haley was also hired to re-record the tune to be used as the show's theme for the first two seasons.

In the remarkable history of this hit song, it is critical to realize that Bill Haley and His Comets' recorded performance was more important than the song itself. First of all, the Comets did the song in the brighter key of A, up from the darker key of F in the original

sheet music. Haley's voice is bright and ebullient. Haley altered the main melody to resemble an old New Orleans parade song known as "Second Line." Billy Gussack's strategically placed rim shots and shifting accents on the drums combined with Marshall Lytle's slapping bass gave the groove its shuffling lilt. Guitarist Danny Cedrone reprised his inimitable guitar solo that he had recorded earlier on the Comets' "Rock the Joint." For the climax, Joey Amborse's "bar walking" style tenor saxophone is stacked on top of the guitars and piano in a big band-style "shout chorus" riff. The whole concept was a group effort, a true ensemble performance, and a moment in recording history never to be successfully repeated or emulated.

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\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.