



Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1977

By James Miller

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A prizewinning historian and journalist who has covered the pop music scene for more than three decades, James Miller brings a powerful and challenging intellectual perspective to his recounting of some key turning points in the history of rock. Arguing that the music underwent its full creative evolution in little more than twenty-five years, he traces its roots from the jump blues of the forties to the disc jockeys who broadcast the music in the early fifties. He shows how impresarios such as Alan Freed and movie directors such as Richard Brooks (of *Blackboard Jungle*) joined black music to white fantasies of romance and rebellion, and then mass-marketed the product to teenagers. He describes how rock matured as a form of music, from Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley to the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and Marvin Gaye, defining a decade of rebellious ferment. At the same time, he candidly recounts how trendsetting rock acts from Jim Morrison and the Doors in the late sixties to the Sex Pistols in the late seventies became ever more crude, outrageous, and ugly -- "as if to mark," writes Miller, "the triumph of the psychopathic adolescent."

Richly anecdotal and always provocative, *Flowers in the Dustbin* tells the story of rock and roll as it has never been told before.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

It appears that *Flowers in the Dustbin* author James Miller has just about had his fill of rock & roll. After chronicling a succession of triumphs in the development of the genre and its allied ancestors and offspring, here the veteran music scribe and editor of the superb first edition of *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* surveys an environment tainted by "the Muzak of the Millennium" and "artifacts of stunning ugliness" (exemplified by Marilyn Manson and Wu-Tang Clan). Miller ponders, "What if rock and roll, as it had evolved from Presley to U2, had destroyed the very musical sources of its own vitality?" The erudite yet eminently readable author doesn't answer his query in these pages, but he does prompt a longing for a time when pop culture moved too fast and impulsively to be processed and packaged.

Miller makes it his mission to tell the story of the "explosive growth" of rock & roll by recounting creative and commercial breakthroughs, dating from Wynonie Harris's 1947 recording of the jump-blues hit "Good Rockin' Tonight" through the last-gasp mutiny of the Sex Pistols and the death of Elvis Presley in 1977. In between, the development of top-40 radio begets the payola scandal of the '50s, Norman Mailer's "white Negro" becomes the model in a line of ever-more-self-conscious mavericks, and the 1960s trinity of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Bob Dylan pile remarkable musical and lyrical innovations atop one another like gifted children eager for attention. Once rock had reached its zenith, from the author's perspective, it didn't so much crumble as settle into regurgitated mush. That Miller is able to chronicle these dour developments in such an involving manner is testimony to his talent as a writer and historian, and to the thrill of rock & roll when it's right. --Steven Stolder

From Publishers Weekly

Wynonie Harris's 1948 hit, "Good Rockin' Tonight," popularized the term "rock" but was confined to Billboard's "race" charts and never crossed over to the larger white audience (though a contemporary African-American performer, Louis Jordan, sold millions of singles). The reason, according to Miller (a 1994 NBCC finalist for *The Passion of Michel Foucault*), is that "rockin'" wasn't merely teenage slang for "having a good time"; it meant "having sex." For Miller, rock and roll's development is best understood as a succession of such contradictions, not as a smooth and continuous progression. Crisply written and carefully contextualized, Miller's story takes into account both the technological and social forces that helped cement rock's position in Western popular culture. In Miller's view, Leo Fender's invention of the solid-body electric guitar and the adolescent restlessness of the baby boom generation played equally important roles. While many of the pivotal moments Miller cites are perhaps too obvious—Elvis Presley's first visit to Sam Philips's Sun recording studios, Brian Epstein's discovery of the Beatles at the Cavern, Bob Dylan's electric set at Newport—there are plenty of less celebrated happenings and characters to keep even the most jaded rock critic turning pages. (The white R&B songwriting team of Leiber and Stoller—who wrote "Kansas City"—loom almost as large here as Lennon and McCartney.) Particularly refreshing is Miller's attention to the place of such movies as Richard Brooks's *Blackboard Jungle* and Perry Henzell's *The Harder They Come* in the development of rock. The portentous subtitle of the book points to rock's "fall"; in Miller's view, this is part and parcel of its cultural acceptability, which has robbed the music of its original revolutionary energy. For him, the genre's bestselling album, Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, was possible only after the original thrill of rock and roll was gone. Photos. (Aug.)

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From Library Journal

The author, a historian and former pop music critic for Newsweek, explores the cultural underpinnings of Fifties and Sixties rock'n'roll. In dozens of brief chapters, he identifies turning points in rock history: the rise of jump blues, the introduction of Top 40 radio, Alan Freed's rock'n'roll dances, Dick Clark's American Bandstand, and the payola scandal. Miller pays special attention to Elvis Presley and the Beatles, rehashing such oft-told tales as the flurry over Beatlemania, Elvis's first appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show, and his death in 1977. Despite his claim to have written a social history of rock'n'roll, Miller only superficially links rock events to larger forces in American culture. He ignores entire musical genres—the Beach Boys and the California sound, soul music, funk, heavy metal, and fusion—and acts as if rock reached a creative dead end after the 1960s. The result is a fast-moving, well-written, entertaining, but superficial and incomplete account that will appeal to a popular audience unfamiliar with rock'n'roll.

-A David P. Szatmary, *Univ. of Washington, Seattle*

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