

## RockingMusicInTheMovies1956TextTVS

### 1956- Rocking Music in the Movies

by Tim Van Schmidt

Yeah, I'm old fashioned. I still play DVDs on a machine for entertainment. That's how I viewed these great rock and roll movies of 1956. I just put them on my Netflix queue and they came in the mail. Put 'em back in the envelope and slip 'em in the mail, movie gone again- no problem.

I wasn't going to write about movies in this particular investigation. But then the historian in me perked up when in my reading and research I kept running across particular references about the rock and roll craze of 1956 as reflected in several movies released that year. The movies themselves prove pretty slow watching as far as the plots are concerned, but then again, each one is jammed with studio footage of many of the artists of the time. What a treasure trove of experience- to actually see Frankie Lymon's beaming face, Little Richard's stage mania and Chuck Berry's rock and roll dominance.

#### The Girl Can't Help It

I began my 1956 rock and roll movie journey with "The Girl Can't Help It," starring Jayne Mansfield, a blonde bombshell if there ever was one. She teases the eye every time she is on the screen and I'm not talking about her acting ability. Mansfield plays a gangster moll named Jerri Jordan. Edmond O'Brien plays her gangster boyfriend (Marty "Fatso" Murdoch) and Tom Ewell plays entertainment agent Tom Miller, who gets hired to turn Jerri into a star. Everybody is getting into making rock and roll records and Murdoch wants to get in on it. The trouble is, Jerri doesn't really want to be a star- she just wants to be a plain old housewife- serving her husband and making a home. Yeah, right. That about tells you what the plot action is like in this one.

Fortunately, Miller shows Jerri around town- literally showing her sexy wiggle off to the club owners- by attending performances by great artists of the time like the Platters, Fats Domino, Little Richard and Gene Vincent. Some of the artists are playing for live audiences- at least in a studio- and the crowds are often dancing to the music, American Bandstand-style. The performances are lip-synched, OK, but you get to see all of these performers in their prime.

That includes the great Little Richard, who gets to perform two numbers standing in front of his piano and with his full honking band in the background. The camera focuses on Richard's cool shoes, the sweat and his wild hair on "Ready Teddy" and "She's Got it" is an appropriate theme song for the movie- that Mansfield wiggle, in specific. Richard's music is busy, brash and hepped up, his wide eyes maybe betraying a certain unease with lip-synching in front of the camera, but rocking with aggressive, deliberate abandon nonetheless. In this case, Richard is presented more formally- the audience is sitting back and letting Richard wail.

More great footage in "The Girl Can't Help It" includes Gene Vincent and his band, the Blue Caps, performing the great 1956 hit "Be Bop A Lula." In the story, the band is just another rock and roll group in town using a rehearsal space Miller and Jerri drop by to use. Vincent is working on the look that seemed to be in favor for up and coming rock and rollers of the time- the partially slicked by hair, a shock of it going wild, performing with an acoustic guitar and self-absorbed passion. In "The Girl Can't Help It," Vincent is intense and dramatic, his voice percolating with the bubbly progress of the song. It's a great moment when the Blue Caps flick off their hats all at once- a simple, yet visually effective action.

Look no further than Elvis Presley to define the look that Vincent also seemed to be adopting at the time. The Presley-Vincent rock and roll look was also being cultivated by two other performers in "The Girl Can't Help It," Eddie Fontaine and Eddie Cochran, clearly suggesting a common fashion trend. (A nagging question comes up here: was Presley setting the trend or was he a follower too?)

In "The Girl Can't Help It," Fontaine performs "Cool It Baby," a splashy, showy piece, his guitar more of a prop than a necessity. Fontaine has the Presley-Vincent look, but the music betrays a connection more to show business than to the burgeoning music movement of rock and roll- it's a big production piece, a showpiece as opposed to a dance record.

More authentic is Eddie Cochran, depicted performing his tune "20 Flight Rock" as part of a mock television broadcast. The guy in the song is just too tired to rock after trudging to his honey up all those flights of stairs- but in true rock and roll style, sandy-haired Cochran doesn't look worn out at all and performs with appropriate abandon. It's a fun and passionate highlight of the music in the movie.

Another major music highlight of "The Girl Can't Help It"- and a discovery for me as I had previously been unaware of this group- was the Treniers, performing "Rockin' is Our Business." In the story, they're

a band recording in a studio. But with three main vocalists and a backing band to boot, their lively, active performance style is nothing but handclapping fun.

That's not all the music in the movie either. A group called the Chuckles perform another show-business piece titled "Cinnamon Sinner" and prove that rocking and rolling with an accordion is something to contend with. Vocalist Abbey Lincoln, first of all, proves that Mansfield isn't the only good looking woman in a gown in the movie, but also delivers an impassioned, gospel-influenced performance with "Spread the Word." Julie London figures into the plot of the story- as Miller's old flame- and she appears in some dreamy, otherworldly sequences, including when she delivers a steamy "Cry Me a River." The Platters also appear, performing "You'll Never Know."

My very favorite music moment in "The Girl Can't Help It," however, is when Fats Domino performs "Blue Monday." Domino has such an interesting look compared to all the rocker wannabes- a kind of beaming rhythm and blues Buddha at the piano with a full supporting band. The song is good unto itself, but what makes it thrilling is that the crowd is dancing away to it. The camera cuts to scenes revealing that some of the female dancers are barefoot, their dresses swirling.

I had to do a double-take during the Domino scene because the camera not only catches the dresses swirling, but also, for just a split second, a peak underneath. It was a little shocking considering how basically conservative the movie is in general, except when Mansfield is jiggling on screen, of course. It seemed "out of character" to include a little panty-watching. Underpants or not, however, what makes this scene great is the excitement of the dancing in combination with Domino's music.

Watching the dancing is not only exciting, but also perhaps reveals something about rock and roll. The dancing is very active and busy but there is a sense that the actual rock and roll dance steps were related to swing dancing. You could say that the music has an element of swing to it too, but kind of tightened up and brought down to the very basics- the progress of the beat, with just that fun little skip going on in the rhythm. This suggests that rock and roll owed a lot to the swing music of the previous decade- as much as it did to country elements and rhythm and blues.

That movies became another outlet for the rock and roll music craze is not surprising- Hollywood was still king of entertainment at this time and it was searching for new things to make movies about all the time. It would make sense that a trend attracting teenagers to the dance halls in larger and larger numbers would also attract movie moguls who would rather attract those teenagers to the movie theaters.

Also interesting in "The Girl Can't Help It" is the portrayal of the music business. Here, it's an adult business, pandering to the swelling ranks of teenagers- the Baby boomers just starting to come of age- not unlike the movie business. Years later, the element of youth would not only take over the style of music being presented, but it would also end up taking over the business itself. But in 1956, it seems that the performers were just the performers and that the business side of things was taken care of- and manipulated- by adult professionals, who "knew better."

This movie about the music business gets pretty corny, but it does reveal another key ingredient to the music scene of 1956- the jukebox. Besides the radio, where else would kids hear the latest records? As in the movie, it seems those who controlled the jukeboxes controlled part of the music market.

The youthful frenzy of rock and roll maybe is a little out of place in the showrooms, the suits, ties and evening gowns in a lot of the scenes in "The Girl Can't Help It," clocking in at 1 hr 39 min. Here again, it's an adult and established music industry trying to fit rock and roll into old molds. But just that rock and roll got in the door is impressive enough.

Rock, Rock, Rock!

The second 1956 music movie I checked out was "Rock, Rock, Rock!" featuring Tuesday Weld as teenager Dori Graham. Also appearing is Teddy Randazzo, as Dori's love interest and the winner of an Alan Freed talent contest. Randazzo is credited in "Rock, Rock, Rock!" as being a member of "The Three Chuckles," the group in "The Girl Can't Help It" who attempt to rock and roll with an accordion. Randazzo is free to be a crooner in this one rather than wrestle with the squeeze box.

The production values of "Rock, Rock, Rock!" (1 hr. 23 minutes) are really clunky and the story itself is pretty dumb- a high school yarn- thin yarn at that. The whole thing is arthritically stiff, the acting is childishly delivered and there's little of even fleeting interest in the main body of the movie.

However, the scenes in "Rock, Rock, Rock!" moderated by Alan Freed are a treasure. Freed's influence dominates in two sequences- one is a slice of Freed's television showcase, watched by Dori and her friend one evening at home, with her goofy Dad trying to resist the primal pull of the new music. The other sequence occurs when Freed brings his live showcase to Dori's school for their prom. Both chunks

of the movie present more of the music stars of the day, appearing rapid-fire like at the Grand Ole Opry. Freed succinctly sums up the new music he was so intrinsically involved in promoting when he calls rock and roll "a river," picking up body and strength from a number of musical streams.

Freed himself performs a little with his own rock and roll orchestra- vocally chipping in the phrases "rock and roll boogie" and "we want rock and roll all night long" during a couple of upbeat tunes.

Jimmy Cavello and His House Rockers, a showbusy unit with some of the rock and roll look (the Presley-Vincent look) but a smoother show band delivery- is featured on two songs, "The Big Beat," a song cataloging various types of music at the time, and "Rock, Rock, Rock," both high energy dance songs. There's something about their splashy sound that doesn't seem authentic in terms of rock and roll- like the band, apparently a tight, rehearsed unit, just added the word "rock" to whatever they were doing. It's perhaps a little telling that the instrumental breaks in both songs feature sax and piano solos, not guitar work. Still, their confidence and the swinging nature of the material make Cavello a movie highlight.

Also working the rock and roll look and sound is the Johnny Burnette Trio, playing "Lonesome Train." Not an orchestra or a show band, Burnette plays with an electric guitarist and an upright bass player. You get a sense that they are truly a working unit and they seem to be hooked into the main vein of the rock and roll coming out of Memphis- a little bit of rhythm and blues injected into a simmering country song.

"Rock, Rock, Rock!" also offers some notable appearances by vocal groups. I enjoyed getting acquainted with the Moonglows, who are featured twice, performing "I Knew From the Start" and "Over and Over." The group featured a lead vocalist, three supporting vocalists and a guy, right up in the front line, playing an electric guitar. The group delivers their songs with a smart, sharp sense of rhythm, indicating that their inclination was to produce dance tunes, despite the cascading vocals and seriously sincere finishes of both pieces.

A black and white, photo studio quality scene with the Flamingos, performing "Will I Be Crying," is very effective. The group, identified as being from Chicago, features a smooth, high pitched lead vocalist, a nice blend of backing voices and a sweet sincerity.

Mixed into all this is La Vern Baker, the only female performer in the lot, whose sing-songy "Tra La La" carries a little bit of mambo in the beat. It's kind of a dumb song and you get a sense that Baker could definitely do better, but since it's the performer's only opportunity in the movie, she seems content with hamming it up a little.

The variety factor works against the movie, however, in the goofy performance of Cirino and the Bowties, from Brooklyn, performing "Ever Since I Can Remember" like some fraternity boys mugging around with their girl friends. That also applies to some of the other clunky musical elements, including star Weld lip-synching to a soundtrack by Connie Francis. The movie dips lowest when even a little girl at an outdoor party- Ivy Schulman- sings a "rock and roll" song.

But who cares, really, when "Rock, Rock, Rock!" affords the opportunity to get up close and personal with Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers? The outfit- featuring young Lymon singing out in front along with a rank of vocalists- performs two tunes, "Baby Baby," and "I'm Not a Juvenile Delinquent." Lymon is obviously a natural performer and his confident, unbroken youthful voice combines with an active and riveting stage presence to make him stand way out from the rest.

However, the Teenagers seem to know this and their smiling faces, choreographed moves and able vocal support accentuates Lymon's powerful presence with professional grace. But it also looks like the whole group is having fun. That is underscored by the instance of group dancing during the brief instrumental break in "Baby Baby." Unlike anyone else in "Rock, Rock, Rock!" or "The Girl Can't Help," Lymon and the Teenagers dance to entertain, doing the splits, then quickly get back to rocking and rolling.

The scene featuring Lymon and the Teenagers performing "I'm Not a Juvenile Delinquent" certainly seems odd- like a commercial break from the main sponsor. The song extols the virtues of staying in school and out of trouble and I find it hard to believe that any teenager would write such a piece of adult propaganda. Lymon and company seem to know this and their smiles at the end of the song, with their fingers cutely raised to their chins as youthful angels, betray a little irony in the whole thing.

But my favorite scene in "Rock, Rock, Rock!", hands down, is the one featuring Chuck Berry, performing "You Can't Catch Me." At the beginning of the scene, you see Berry crouched down, waiting for the track to begin. It's just a second, maybe, but in that second you see a performer poised, ready to leap. Once the track starts, Berry wrangles his guitar with exaggerated abandon, wriggles constantly in his loose suit

and adds expressions and physical motions to act out the action in the song. When Berry talks about putting his foot into his gas tank, he steps on it on stage.

Berry gets a little duck-walking in at the end of the song- strutting low to the floor with the knees bent- and all in all it's a great performance. His intense stare at the camera as he tries to reproduce what was probably an exciting live stage presence told me he was a showman deluxe, ready to rock at the drop of a hat.

The dancing scenes in "Rock, Rock, Rock!" are more plentiful than in "The Girl Can't Help It," especially for the bigger band numbers. When you don't really have a plot, it's the wise thing to do. It wouldn't surprise me to find that a lot of the dancers in the crowd scenes were professionals- it all looks so wild and fun, so easy. Once again, the camera is deliberately set up to catch the feet, some barefoot, and the whirling skirts of the girl dancers, resulting once again in just a flash of underpants here and there. It can't be a mistake that both films so far in my investigation would have this element.

#### Rock Around the Clock

The big daddy of the rock and roll movies of 1956, it turns out, is "Rock Around the Clock." Hollywood paid tribute to the new phenomenon of rock and roll by producing a movie ode to the new and the old of the music business. This one isn't so much of an excuse to showcase the bands, although that happens, as a story about savvy business people riding a new wave of popularity. That includes Johnny Johnston as band manager Steve Hollis, Alix Talton as Corinne Talbot, a conniving New York booking agent, and DJ Alan Freed, a club owner and a staunch promoter of rock and roll. Talton in particular stands out as an actor in this crew, moving easily across the screen and delivering her lines with a wise chill that makes her character completely despicable even more than fifty years later.

The opening sequence of "Rock Around the Clock" (directed by Fred F. Sears, 1 hr. 17 min.) is an important indicator of the time. In the story, manager Hollis gets into an argument with the leader of a dance band orchestra he is booking- an old fashioned unit playing limpid big band stuff. The sparse audience and the lack of interest by the bandleader to try something new results in Hollis parting ways with the orchestra, hitting the road to find something fresh, exciting and tuned in to the current music trends. These scenes most certainly reflect what was really going on at the time on the established music circuits- the old ways of making money with music were proving ineffective as change loomed on the horizon.

Alan Freed, once again, appears as himself. Appearing in these 1956 rock and roll movies, Freed is portrayed as a tireless promoter of rock and roll and seems to be the first name on anyone's lips when they mention the term. That film producers understood this and made sure Freed gave his stamp of approval to their projects by being featured in the movies speaks volumes of the influence he wielded. Even though the rock and roll craze was about teenagers, Freed represents those adults in the music business who were sympathetic to the movement. They were as much promoters of the music as they were the kids who were dancing to it. That it also made sense money-wise was a definite plus.

Fortunately, the business end of it isn't the only element to the movie, it's just the beginning. Bill Haley and the Comets appear as themselves in a fictionalized account of their rise to prominence. Hollis and a buddy stumble across the band at a small rural town's Saturday night dance and start scheming almost immediately to turn the group into a nationally touring hit. That means playing their happy amalgam of country, swing and boogie, and Haley and the Comets do plenty of that throughout the movie- well, lip-synch, anyway.

Haley and the Comets' song list is huge, including, of course, their runaway hit from the previous year, "Rock Around the Clock," as well as the fun, infectious "See You Later, Alligator" and the honking sax showcase number, "Rudy's Rock." Other Haley songs included in the movie are "Happy Baby," "Rock," "Rock-A-Beatin' Boogie," the very memorable "Razzle Dazzle," "ABC Boogie" and "Mambo Rock." Not all of the music is presented as a performance- it also serves as a soundtrack to the action. The movie mightily defines Haley and the Comets and leaves behind a full legacy even if the group never accomplished anything else again.

Also performing in "Rock Around the Clock" is the Platters, Tony Martinez and Freddie Bell and the Bellboys. The Platters, introduced by Freed as the number one vocal group in the country, perform twice with the Ernie Freeman Combo. Both times, the group trots on stage with the energy of top shelf athletes, ready to go and aiming to please with their two big, big hits of the time, "Only You" and "The Great Pretender." Lead singer Tony Williams is strong indeed, his voice swelling and rising with each tune, the soaring melodies punctuated by the layered vocal support of the others. It's passionate, emotional music, so sincerely delivered it overcomes the impulse to discard some of the romantic overstatement in the lyrics that might sound less convincing in the hands of a less successful unit.

Tony Martinez and band appears several times in "Rock Around the Clock" as a nod to another musical trend of the time- the novelty combo. Martinez and his attractive dancer-singer actually have brief speaking parts, but their spicy mambo music, full of lots of percussion and rhythmic fireworks, gives an



interesting counterpoint to the rock and roll. At one point, Martinez steps away from his role as vocalist-bandleader and starts wailing away on a vibraphone, perhaps one of the most impressive displays of instrumental work in the movie.

Most fun, however, are the sequences with Freddie Bell and the Bellboys. They're one of those splashy showbusy units seemingly attaching "rock" to their slick, upbeat tunes. Still, the group's energy is infectious. It sure looks like they're all having fun as the stage remains very active, every band member seemingly in motion. Bell and the Bellboys deliver their big hit, "Giddy Up A Ding Dong," a goofy, nonsensical delight, and "I'm Gonna Teach You How to Rock," one of those direct efforts to cash in on the rock and roll craze.

While the rock and roll of Haley and the Comets and the others is an important element to "Rock Around the Clock," it's actually the rock and roll dancing that takes center stage. It's a big part of the story, with Lisa Gaye and Earl Barton playing Lisa and Jimmy Johns, a brother-sister dancing team whose steps on the dance floor help inspire the rock and roll craze. It's not a stretch. As Johnston says as band manager Hollis, the Johns help demonstrate how to dance to the new music. It's an exceptionally insightful observation because he sees that it's not enough just to present the music, but to also present a way to use it. Therefore, the dancing is also a big part of the action of the movie. That includes multiple crowd shots of whirling and twirling.

### Don't Knock the Rock

But wait, there was even another rock and roll movie released in 1956. Apparently, "Rock Around the Clock" was so successful that they put another movie- "Don't Knock the Rock"- in the works right away using many of the key elements. That means featuring Bill Haley and the Comets, including Alan Freed in the cast and showcasing prominent acts from the day like Little Richard and the Treniers. The movie also gives plenty of screen time to rock and roll dancing.

Both "Rock Around the Clock" and "Don't Knock the Rock" (84 minutes) were directed by Fred F. Sears and both sandwich in stories about the music industry in 1956. However, "Rock Around the Clock" is about the rise of rock and roll and "Don't Knock the Rock" is about the backlash to the popular trend once it had risen.

"Don't Knock the Rock" starts with a popular rock and roller named Arnie Haines, played with a collected coolness by crooner Alan Dale, who has become exhausted by a full schedule and by the frenzy of his fans- particularly his clothes-ripping female fans. This is all continually stoked up by his publicity-hound manager, Alan Freed. Haines and his band are missing the life they used to live in their old hometown and decide to chuck a fistful of bookings in order to go back home and take an extended vacation.

But there's trouble in the old home town, called Mellondale. It seems the mayor and other parents have put their foot down squarely on rock and roll, banning it from local events and putting the parents and teenagers at odds with each other. When Haines and band arrive at the train station, they are met by celebrating teens and disgusted parents. The first showdown between Haines and the mayor occurs just moments after stepping off the train and it sets a gloomy tone for the start of the group's visit.

While it's the musicians who get popular, becoming the public focus of rock and roll, it seems that it isn't the music the parents and teenagers are at odds over, it is the dancing. When Dale has his first argument with the grumpy mayor, he asks what is so wrong with dancing, not playing music. Later in the production, during an arts exhibition which is meant to soften the adults' attitude toward rock and roll, the focus is on styles of dancing throughout the years- from George Washington's time to the 1920s and finally to contemporary rock and roll.

Dale, as Haines, makes for an unusual rock and roll hero. First of all, it's a little hard to tell how much rock and roll is in his music. "Don't Knock the Rock" opens with Dale performing the song "I Cry More" on stage and he proves to be more of a crooner than a rock and roller. It's a high-energy performance, with the four backing vocalists adding plenty of handclapping and Dale doing a little bit of dramatic stage posing and some hip swiveling. But the song, along with others in the movie, seems to be more show business than invention.

Next, Dale just doesn't look like a rock and roller- he's dressed in a suit and tie most of the time, his hair slicked back. This is in sharp contrast to the surly guitar-and-a-guy image being worked by Elvis Presley and others. That could well be on purpose, since the message of the movie is that rock and roll is OK for typical teenagers. Dale's image softens the rebellious tone of rock and roll and brings it on home, literally.

And yet, Haines is doing something very rock and roll-like in "Don't Knock the Rock." He's going ahead with the party no matter what the authorities say. And it's promoted in a time honored tradition of independent music- word of mouth. In his cool way, Dale creates a decent hero in Haines after all.

This set up for "Don't Knock the Rock" brings up an important element about the music industry and that is, the power of the press. A lot of the action in the movie revolves around what goes into the newspapers. In the first part of the movie, Freed stays busy grabbing headlines for Haines and crew, which raises their commercial profile. However, bad publicity also plays a big part here- the trouble Haines and band stir up in their home town puts them into the national papers and not only affects their string of bookings, but also the bookings of other rock and rollers. In this case, the old phrase "there's no such thing as bad publicity" just isn't true. Added to this is the element that the female lead's mother is a national newspaper columnist and seems to be holding the whole future of rock and roll in her hands. It turns out that regaining positive publicity becomes the saving grace at the end of the movie.

The dancing scenes in "Don't Knock the Rock" were "staged and created" by Earl Barton, half of the "brother-sister" dance team featured prominently in "Rock Around the Clock." Those scenes occur often throughout the production, sometimes almost randomly, including in Haines' apartment living room- fan club "kids" literally bouncing off the furniture- and on the railroad station platform in Mellondale. While the dancing is fun, there is a sense that what is being presented is being done by professional dancers, taking the action away from regular kids.

The costuming is sharp, dancers dressed in everything from tight shorts and pulled up argyle socks to whirling skirts. Thanks to those professionals, there also doesn't seem to be a need for panty-peeking dance shots of the crowd, especially during one scene featuring Haley rehearsing with a chorus line of female dancers, all wrapped up tight in short shorts. There's no mistaking the emphasis on the dancers' rears. There's other tight short shorts- or rather bathing suits- in other scenes, also focusing on the rears, giving "Don't Knock the Rock" that little bit of sex it needs to connect to the perceived racy image of rock and roll. Actress Jana Lund- who plays Sunny Everett, the scheming female of this movie- adds to that with a sensual solo dance to some blues piano in an especially tight top.

However, there is one particularly unusual dancing scene in "Don't Knock the Rock." That is, while Little Richard and his band are performing "Tutti Frutti," the dance floor is cleared for the winners of a local dance contest. Apparently, the dancers are not professionals, and, in fact, the male dancer is obviously overweight. This perhaps leads to a little extra reaction by the crowd- some twittering and laughing- but the couple dances away only a few feet away from Richard, they look like they're having fun and the scene succeeds mightily where the professional segments do not- it ties things back to real, everyday people.

That doesn't mean that the music is not important in "Don't Knock the Rock." There are plenty of musical highlights in the movie starting with several Haley and the Comets tunes. Several of the songs, including "Hot Dog, Buddy Buddy," and an instrumental titled "Goofin' Around," showcases the Comets' great guitarist Franny Beecher, whose speed and dexterity are impressive indeed. As in "Rock Around the Clock," Comets sax player Rudy Pompilli and bassist Al Rex also take center stage, Pompilli honking and squealing and Rex literally turning his bass on end for a little crazy fun.

Another major Haley highlight isn't a Haley song at all- it's Haley performing a song popularized by Little Richard, "Rip It Up." In the hands of Haley and band, the tune keeps its original liveliness, but acquires a little polish. The dance showcase on screen during "Rip It Up" is terrific- dancers throwing each other, spinning, laughing and generally just flying through the air. Haley's "Hook, Line and Sinker" also appears in the soundtrack.

The Treniers appear twice in "Don't Knock the Rock" and, each time, they just take over the screen. The first tune, "Out of the Bushes," I couldn't help but laugh out loud as the three lead singers of the Treniers mix exaggerated, leg wiggling stage motions and facial expressions with the upbeat music. They are scary indeed, ending the song with a dramatic "Boo!" The Treniers must have been a great act to see live. That also goes for their second tune, "Rocking on Saturday Night," which is effectively underscored by some energetic handclapping and antics like holding their ears when the sax plows into a solo.

Less comfortable on the screen is Little Richard, who does have a kind of stunned look throughout. I don't blame him- it must be rough trying to lip-synch to such exciting music. Still, Richard pulls out an exciting approximation of a performance- jumping back in "Long Tall Sally" when Uncle John "ducks back in the alley," playing the piano backwards or with his leg up on the instrument, occasionally whooping and squealing. And wow, what a band- including four sax players doing choreographed moves. Haley must have been a Richard fan because not only does he and the band perform "Rip It Up," but there's even a glimpse during "Long Tall Sally" of Haley sitting and enjoying the music.

Also appearing in "Don't Knock the Rock" is Bill Appell and the Applejacks, playing a light rock.

The writing in "Don't Knock the Rock" gets a little heavy handed at times, making obvious pitches for a certain point of view. But the lessons they are trying to teach are still valid- that teenagers should be able to make up their own minds on some things and adults should try to trust rather than dictate.

In a beach scene, Haines and his love interest end up discussing the meaning of rock and roll, concluding that it is a business like any other, but has also become a flag that teenagers are waving in their parents' faces. Haines sees that it isn't about him particularly, it's about the need for teenagers to have someone, or something, to focus on. Later, it seems like the whole community of Mellondale is in on a discussion about how parents don't want to blame themselves for their teenager's behavior, but want to blame rock and roll instead- and how unfair that is.

Fay Baker, who plays big time news columnist Arlene MacLaine, gets to deliver some of the best lines in the movie, drily telling her daughter that the rock and rollers "all need a sedative," that they are moving so fast "they look like a double exposure" and that rock and roll looks like "the most violent exercise."

It all ends in a celebration with Dale taking over at the mike, the band wailing and the dancers going nuts to the title tune, "Don't Knock the Rock." Everything ends happily and rock and roll is restored. It remains, as Haines puts it, "a safe and sane dance for all young people." As the end of the movie puts it, "Dig you later."

## Forbidden Planet

There's a scene in the 1956 science fiction movie, "Forbidden Planet," when a character named Dr. Morbius, played by Walter Pidgeon, is explaining to some 22nd Century military men his discovery of an advanced ancient civilization on another planet. Morbius goes to his desk and drops a small disk- or maybe a kind of pellet- into a small cone-like device and it starts emitting electronic music- abstract but purposeful bubbles of tone and sound texture he claims was music created 500,000 years before. The scale of his statement is mind-staggering in itself, especially considering this investigation is only considering sounds from fifty some years ago- 500,000? Nearly impossible to comprehend.

However, two musicians- Louis and Bebe Barron- tried to do that. That is, they tried to conceptualize alien music from the distant past. Not only that, but they created an entirely original and striking soundtrack for "Forbidden Planet" that had nothing to do with rock and roll, pop, or even music in the traditional sense. Their sometimes harsh, sometimes random sounds at times also certainly heighten the tension being created in the movie. It is by all means otherworldly "music"- credited as "electronic tonalities"- compared to Chuck Berry and Little Richard.

The Barrons bring a brave and courageous artistry to their work in "Forbidden Planet," and while the bleeps and bloops of various primitive electronic boxes are far, far removed from the rest of this discussion, I felt it was important to include their accomplishment. That is, not only was there an avant-garde experimenting with sound in 1956, but they were able to get it exposed to a mass market via a big release movie. The soundtrack is a showcase of mind-teasing sound art- and the movie's great too.

Shake, Rattle & Rock!

Directed by Lou Rusoff...1956...72 min...featuring Mike Connors, Lisa Gaye, Fats Domino, Tommy Charles, Big Joe Turner.

Rock Pretty Baby

Directed by Richard Bartlett...1956...89 min...featuring Sal Mineo, Fay Wray, Rod McKuen, Shelley Fabares, John Saxon.