Australian Popular Culture Essay

**Issue:** Compare and contrast Australian popular culture before and after the birth of rock 'n' roll.

**Contestion:** The birth of rock ‘n’ roll saw many changes in Australian society such as the social standing of teenagers, fashion, and...

The years following WWII saw some significant changes in the characteristics of Australian society. In the 1950-60s rock and roll music entered Australia through America and was an extremely popular style of music through these decades. The effect of the birth of rock ‘n’ roll can be measured by the alteration of Australian popular culture that followed. Some significant changes include the change in attitudes of youths; which resulted in the creation of a new stereotype, distinctive changes in fashion, and lastly a change in ideas around racial segregation.

During the war, the youth of Australian society were expected to live by social values and had very little freedom. Men were to find a job as soon as possible to support their families, while women were expected to marry and have children. During these times the idea of ‘teenagers’ didn’t really exist, children grew into adults; the idea of a middle stage (adolescents), did not exist. However the birth of rock and roll saw the establishment of a new social class, the teenager. In August 1955, the Sydney Sun-Herald warned that the rock and roll ‘dance music craze’ that was sweeping America would soon reach Australia. It warned readers of the erratic behaviour that this music brought out in teenagers. Rock music was considered rebellious music for teenagers. In November 1956, Brisbane experienced its first rock and roll riot, teenage fans had been charged with assaulting the police officers. The problem teenagers of these times were perceived as being so far estranged from society they were given the titles, Bodgie (male) and Widgie (female). A brief sample of newspaper headlines of this decade clearly indicate changes in the behaviour and perception of teenagers after the introduction of rock ‘n’ roll. They include ‘Bodgie Razor Attack’, (Daily Mirror, 30 April 1957), ‘Savage Bodgie Brawls’ (Daily Mirror, 22 January 1957) and ‘Bodgie in Bottle Attack’ (Melbourne Herald, 7 January 1956). During the 1950s many parents disliked rock and roll because they feared that it would cause juvenile delinquency. The lyrics to rock songs were often rebellious and vulgar, which tended to accurately reflect the personalities of the rock stars who were often involved in activities such as drug dealing. Subsequently parents feared that their children would try to copy their idols and attempted (unsuccessfully) to ban this style of music from radios and juke boxes. Bruce Tucker author of “Tell Tchaikovsky the News: Postmodernism, Popular Culture, and the Emergence of Rock and Roll” say in his journal “Urging juke box operators to purge “immoral” records... brings out animalism and vulgarity” (pg. 40-41). It is evident that the stereotypes given to youths, (which still exist today), were heavily influenced by the birth of rock ‘n’ roll in Australia.
Secondly, rock ‘n’ roll brought some distinctive new styles over from America. Previously fashions had been set by the fashion houses that catered to the adult market and the youth had just followed these trends. Parents dressed their children almost exactly the same as they did themselves; boys in high collared button up shirts, slacks and loafers, with hair slicked back, and girls in plain or patterned long dresses, high ankle socks, buckle shoes or flats, with their hair done up in curls. The 1950s were a transition from the conservatism, restraint and formality of the 1940s, to looser, more informal style. The 1950s saw a massive economic boom that was fuelled by a large increase in European immigrants. This meant that the young rock and roll fans of that decade had more economic power than any generation before them. The fashion industry of this decade rushed to cater for the needs of this new market. Teens who embraced rock ‘n’ roll began looking and dressing in ways that veered from the accepted norm. Teenage boys wore tight-fitting blue jeans and white T-shirts: an outfit that represented the essence of rock ‘n’ roll rebellion. Throughout the 1950s, women's clothing was also influenced by the rock ‘n’ roll craze. Full skirts in bright colours become popular for dancing, also short ankle socks, scarves and cropped cardigans gained popularity. Many young fans also took to imitating their favourite rock stars which had a significant effect on the fashion industry of the 1960s. For example, famous rock star Elvis Presley affected the fashion of youth everywhere, they began flaunting his slicked back ‘duck tail’ hair style and long sideburns. Young men in the 1950s began to wear brighter colours and sharp, flashy suits were very trendy. Loose, unbuttoned shirts with upturned collars also became fashionable. To summarize, the fashion of the 1950-60s were affected considerably by the styles of famous rock stars and the attitudes of rebellion fuelled by rock music.

Lastly, rock music played a significant part in aiding racial acceptance. Before the creation of rock ‘n’ roll the music was segregated, records from black artists were sold in different stores. Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, blues was classified as "race music" and was marketed only to African Americans. However rock 'n' roll managed to incorporate the soulful sounds of race music into its variety, creating a new style that would entertain audiences of both black and white teenagers. A significant step towards music integration would be the use of the phrase rock ‘n’ roll, it was a term that could be used to introduce both black and white music. It was first used by Alan Freed, a disc jockey in Cleveland, Ohio when he introduced “The Rock and Roll Session” to describe the integration of rhythm and blues and country music he played during his show. At first people were prejudiced towards this new style of music but as it gained popularity attempts to ban rock music were futile. The genre of rock ‘n’ roll forced prejudiced labels to sign black artists because the music was so popular and profitable. Records from black and white artists were now sold in the same music stores, this small step towards equality was a direct result of the success of rock ‘n’ roll. Although this social change was more obvious in America, the principles of racial segregation also existed in Australia in the form of prejudice against Aboriginals. Rock music demonstrated an alternative to the unjust segregation that was customary during the 1950-60s.
In conclusion it can be stated that the introduction of rock ‘n’ roll music had a significant effect on Australian popular culture. This can be seen through the changing behaviour of teenagers, the adaption of fashions and the promotion of racial open-mindedness. Rock ‘n’ roll symbolized a new age fuelled by a rebellion that saw the destruction of conventional stereotypes and ideals. Overall the birth of rock ‘n’ roll resulted in a more open-minded society.

References: