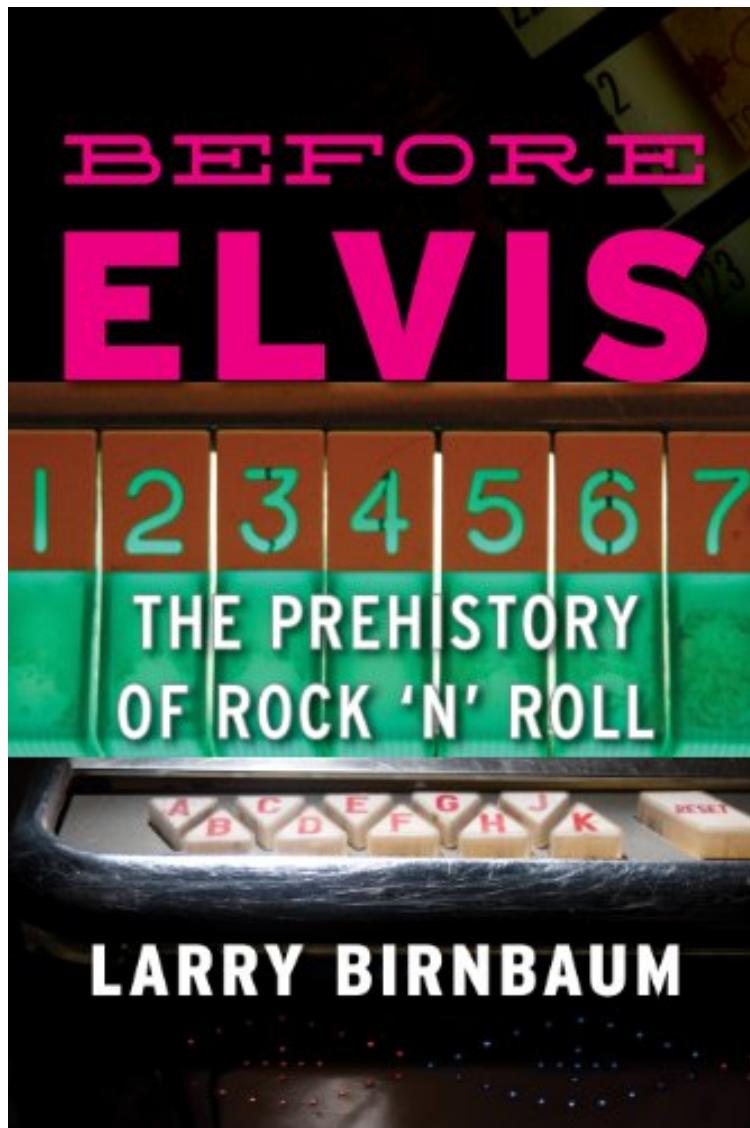


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Before Elvis: The Prehistory of Rock 'n' Roll

Larry Birnbaum

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Larry Birnbaum : Before Elvis: The Prehistory of Rock 'n' Roll before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Before Elvis: The Prehistory of Rock 'n' Roll:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The book was more than necessary since many people think ...By Attila OessThe book was more than necessary since many people think the RB, Pop or Hip Hop etc. started with Elvis, The Beatles or some other artist of that period. Larry in his book clearly shows the connection between the music of the beginning of the nineties and that of the time after Elvis. The evidence he is presenting is overwhelming. The amount of info is enormous and leaves no doubt about the music's origins and and its further development but almost too much. What gets lost a bit is a feeling for the music.I wonder when he listened to all these artists and tracks he is

mentioning. Reading is demanding and requires full concentration but more than rewarding for aficionados of that kind of music.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy DJ MovesAwesome, worth the high price

An essential work for rock fans and scholars, *Before Elvis: The Prehistory of Rock 'n' Roll* surveys the origins of rock 'n' roll from the minstrel era to the emergence of Bill Haley and Elvis Presley. Unlike other histories of rock, *Before Elvis* offers a far broader and deeper analysis of the influences on rock music. Dispelling common misconceptions, it examines rock's origins in hokum songs and big-band boogies as well as Delta blues, detailing the embrace by white artists of African-American styles long before rock 'n' roll appeared. This unique study ranges far and wide, highlighting not only the contributions of obscure but key precursors like Hardrock Gunter and Sam Theard but also the influence of celebrity performers like Gene Autry and Ella Fitzgerald. Too often, rock historians treat the genesis of rock 'n' roll as a bolt from the blue, an overnight revolution provoked by the bland pop music that immediately preceded it and created through the white appropriation of music till then played only by and for black audiences. In *Before Elvis*, Birnbaum daringly argues a more complicated history of rock's evolution from a heady mix of ragtime, boogie-woogie, swing, country music, mainstream pop, and rhythm-and-blues—a melange that influenced one another along the way, from the absorption of blues and boogies into jazz and pop to the integration of country and Caribbean music into rhythm-and-blues. Written in an easy style, *Before Elvis* presents a bold argument about rock's origins and required reading for fans and scholars of rock history.

As the subtitle implies, music journalist Birnbaum approaches the history of rock and roll like an archaeologist. Instead of cave paintings or crudely made tools, Birnbaum has records—lots and lots of records. Unlike most music histories, which tend to focus on performers and their lives, Birnbaum investigates sounds: Where did these rhythms come from? Where did this riff start? The tracing of musical and lyrical memes makes for a consuming, if at times overwhelming, journey through mid-20th-century American pop culture history. Birnbaum's knowledge of the music of this time period is breathtaking, and will make readers wish the book came with a soundtrack....Still, this corrective to what so many of music fans assume they know about rock and pop history is a necessary one and will introduce readers to artists deserving greater attention. This stunning tour de force of prerock history will inspire fans to learn more about the roots of the music they love. (Library Journal, Starred) This is an incredible deep dive into the history of rock 'n' roll by way of jazz, country, and blues. Here is how I read the book: I slid my headphones on, dialed up Spotify, and looked up as many of the artists or songs a Birnbaum discussed. Talk about an education! (Music Tomes) *Before Elvis: The Prehistory of Rock 'n' Roll* is an exemplary work of musical history, combining substantial new research with previously established material for a comprehensive vision of a previously fragmented field. Having a grasp of American music and its sources even pre-dating arrival in America, Birnbaum fulfills his promise of showing how rock 'n' roll after the rise of Elvis Presley was a natural outgrowth of the diversified society which preceded him. Attentive to commercial realities and the complex lives of musical artists, conversant with the musical motifs and lyric themes of the popular music world in both recorded and live-performance, Larry Birnbaum paints a world inhabited by working artists who are fully conscious of their sources, influences and efforts at personal expression, naturally reaching for audiences ever eager for the new twist on a familiar tune. This is a significant work, rich with revelations. (Howard Mandel, author of *Miles, Ornette, Cecil: Jazz Beyond Jazz* and president of the Jazz Journalists Association) I am jealous of Larry Birnbaum, for he seems to have heard every record ever made. Consequently he is one of those rare people who understands that rock'n'roll did not spring suddenly out of the brain of some fevered disc jockey, and his book is a rollicking ride through the vernacular music of several decades before 'Heartbreak Hotel'. (Donald Clarke, author, *Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music; Wishing On The Moon: The Life and Times of Billie Holiday; The Rise and Fall of Popular Music; and All or Nothing at all: A Life of Frank Sinatra*) This analysis is just one example of the iconoclastic thinking that makes Mr. Birnbaum's book invaluable. His good ear and deep original research help him overturn much of the conventional wisdom about where rock came from... The author ends by lamenting that "the definitive study of rock 'n' roll origins has yet to be written." It seems clear that with the present volume, a damned good start has been made. (The Wall Street Journal) Birnbaum (a music journalist) has drawn on his encyclopedic knowledge in this history of popular music in much of the 20th century. He expands and updates the coverage in Ed Ward, Geoffrey Stokes, and Ken Tucker's *Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock and Roll* (CH, Jun'87) and Robert Palmer's *Rock and Roll: An Unruly History* (1995), Charlie Gillett's *The Sound of the City* (1971), and Chuck Mancuso's heavily illustrated *Popular Music and the Underground* (1996). The author begins by observing that "the nascent sound of rock 'n' roll could be heard as early as the 1920s in a number of hokum songs, piano boogies, and jazz-band arrangements," and this finally emerged full-blown with Elvis Presley in the mid-1950s. After two introductory chapters, Birnbaum moves into detailed discussions of the blues, boogie-woogie, jazz, country music, and rhythm and blues, and concludes with Frankie Laine, Kay Starr, Johnnie Ray, and Pat Boone. Each chapter offers detailed information on the performers,

songs, record companies, and much more. Birnbaum also provides some technical information on the songs and arrangements. This rich discussion is accompanied by detailed notes that draw on the latest research. *Summing Up: Highly recommended. (CHOICE)"Rock 'n' Roll is just the blues sped up."* That statement might have satisfied a generation of listeners who barely scratched beneath the surface of the genre, looking for its source. And it may have been propagated by a generation of wide-eyed romantics the same way the myth of Robert Johnson was. But it, in no way, satisfied writer Larry Birnbaum, who has penned the definitive history of American music leading up to rock. Believe this: Birnbaum is the music geek Wotan. He has listened to every recording since Edison cylinders were popular. (All About Jazz)[A]n awe-inspiring journey from wax cylinder recordings, negro work songs and African slave spirituals through to early 20th century shellac records and music that has not been transferred onto the modern CD format.... Larry Birnbaum offers us a huge X-Ray of a full catalogue of unsung heroes, buried by the history written from an angle that has everyone believing that rock'n'roll music developed strictly from blues and country music. The author digs into hokum, swing, rhythm and blues, boogie-woogie, doo-wop and jump blues, among many other genres, to uncover the true roots of rock'n'roll. (ClickZoomBytes)Birnbaum's book is chock-full of material [covering the] blues, country, minstrel music, doo wop, big band jump, early rhythm and blues, jive and an overlooked genre that he considers of premium importance, hokum music. All of these, he proves, led to rock. Before Elvis is a fascinating book that should be both in every academic library and on every music lover's shelves. Where else are you going to find out what Harry "the Hipster" Gibson contributed to rock 'n' roll? (Rambles.NET)So, you think you know all there is to know about rock and roll. Nope, not even close. Let Larry Birnbaum set you straight. His 400-page plus book *Before Elvis: The Prehistory of Rock* is; Roll is the definitive word on where our beloved rock music came from, who made it, and how many of those rumors we thought were true aren't. ... Birnbaum presents *Before Elvis: The Prehistory of Rock* is; Roll less like a tired, old history book and more like a living breathing jumpin'; and jivin'; story. Yes, there are lots of facts, but in general, this book is a fun read. In other words, nobody's going to test you on what you learn here, so just sit back and enjoy the lesson. Learn about Lloyd Pricer's career. Read about how specific techniques like the walking bass line became so popular. Discover those under-the-radar guitar slingers. There really isn't any part of the rock and roll story that Birnbaum doesn't get to and that's really what I like most about this book. The author feels his readers need to know it all, and he's researched it well. (Vintage Rock)Before Elvis is considerably well-researched and meticulously written. Details abound not so much because the writer wishes to immortalize himself, but because they are there to correct what has gone wrong and continues to go wrong because most writers of books are too lazy to research extensively, or borrow from sources that are too iffy for a serious work. ... Unlike many books of historic value, the writing is far from being stilted. In fact the prose is rather elegant. . . . Mr. Birnbaum has a conversational style and it is possible to imagine a scenario where the reader is in a large audience listening to the writer speaking. The reader is further enthralled by the substantive writing with which it is easy to become engaged; even enthralled and enraptured. This is also because to the aficionado and the serious student of American ethnomusicology the touchstones in terms of the music are all there. Larry Birnbaum brings it all alive with his writing that combines the mention of anthemic music and a tone and manner that mirrors a fine detective novel. It is clear from his writing that Mr. Birnbaum not only has a passion for the music, but is also a serious student of it. This is a big help for not only the writer, who can go to great lengths to make his thesis known and to prove it, but also benefits the reader who might be on the fringe, such as readers of a work that might also be interested in cultural anthropology. While this is not a book about that subject, the fact that it is written about a music that is so all encompassing it also penetrates that realm. (Jazz da Gama)The introduction to *Before Elvis: The Prehistory of Rock* is; Roll assertively outlines the premise of the entire book. Instead of regurgitating the traditional account of the genre's development — rock and roll springing to life during the mid-1950s as a galvanic collision of RB/blues and country, with a taste of gospel tossed in for good measure — author Larry Birnbaum argues that many additional factors were dropped into the musical stew, including minstrel songs, ragtime, hokum, boogie-woogie, jazz, big band, Caribbean strains, doowop, even straight pop. The rest of the well researched and impressively hefty tome details numerous examples of each genre as the author persuasively states his case. ... *Before Elvis* just may be the best overview of rock and roll's tangled history since Charlie Gillett's groundbreaking *The Sound of the City* in 1970. There is a rich reservoir of information here even if you already have a firm handle on how the music all began. If you are researching the subject for the first time, you are in for quite a rocking ride. (ARSC Journal)This insider's guide through pre-rock history leaves little doubt as to the author's extensive knowledge on the subject, and his study includes countless songs and artists both familiar and forgotten, from luminaries like Cab Calloway and T-Bone Walker to stars who once shone brightly but have since faded with time, like Louis Prima and Clyde McPhatter. In between his discussions of artists and band line-ups, Birnbaum traces song lineages at the hands of different acts, each of which reflected an artist's personal stylistic preferences. This approach is particularly profitable in his discussions of such tracks as "The Train Kept A-Rollin'", "Roll Em Peter", and "Hound Dog", which were covered by multiple artists and which served as flexible moulds that accommodated a wide range of styles. Studying these songs' genealogies makes sense, considering Birnbaum's focus on the evolution of sounds rather than

on musical culture and personalities. (Popular Music)Before Elvis certainly belongs in academic music libraries, and will prove popular in public libraries with robust music holdings. Any serious scholar of popular music—American or otherwise—should read this book. (Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association)For those interested in the multindash;hued origins of this most essential American music, this volume is a welcome and important leap forward in tracing the capillaries and veins leading to rock ‘n’ roll’s heart. (Stereophile)About the AuthorFor some 35 years, Larry Birnbaum has written for periodicals ranging from Down Beat to the New York Times and edited books and magazines about music.