

Handout - Ritchie Valens

Examine each of the materials below, and answer the associated questions. Once the answers are complete, share what you learned about Ritchie Valens with your group.

American Bandstand

American Bandstand was a popular music and dance television show that aired in various forms from 1952 to 1989. Teenagers in the 1950s would rush home from school in the afternoon to hear the latest Rock & Roll music and see fellow teenagers dance on the show.

American Bandstand was ingrained in the pop culture of the 1950s. It was one of the first shows targeted to teenagers and created a safe space for Rock & Roll in the eyes of adults who were hesitant of the new genre.

The show took place in Philadelphia, and hundreds of local teenagers would line up to get a chance to dance on the show. To be on the show, you had to follow a strict dress code and there were always more people in line than could be allowed in.

The producers of the show had a certain image they wanted to portray and Black teens as well as other ethnicities were not allowed in the doors until 1965. While there were a few Black performers on the show in the 1950s, the majority of acts were white.

Watch a clip from American Bandstand through the following link: <https://rb.gy/99tqa>



Questions:

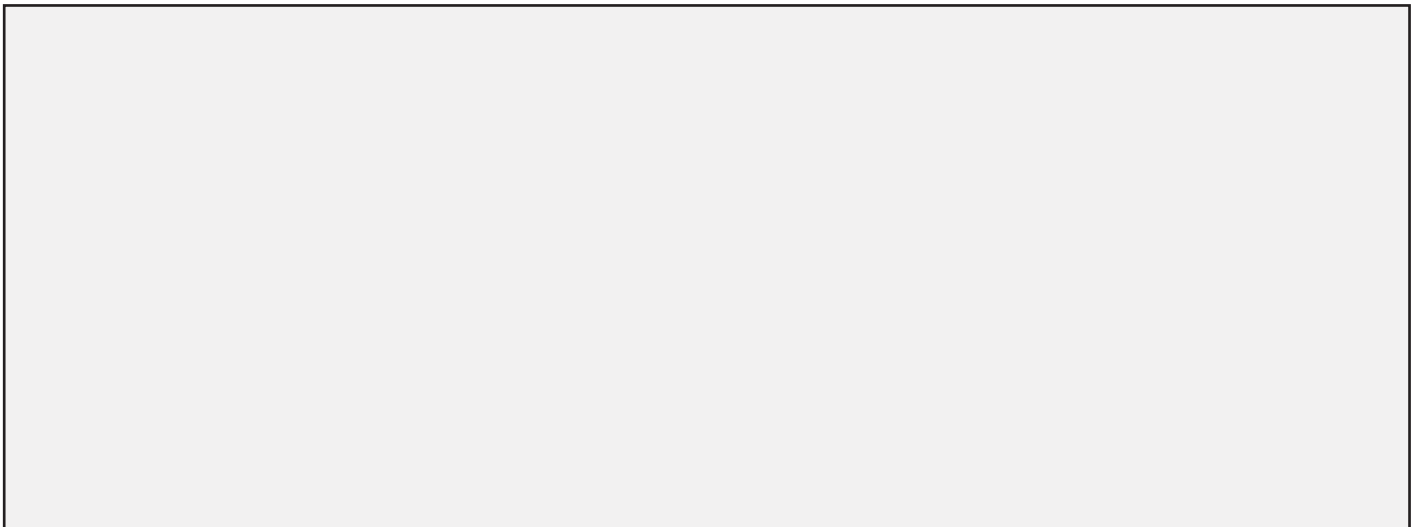
1. What was *American Bandstand*?

2. What do you notice about the people on American Bandstand?

3. What image of the 1950s American teenager do the dancers in *American Bandstand* represent?

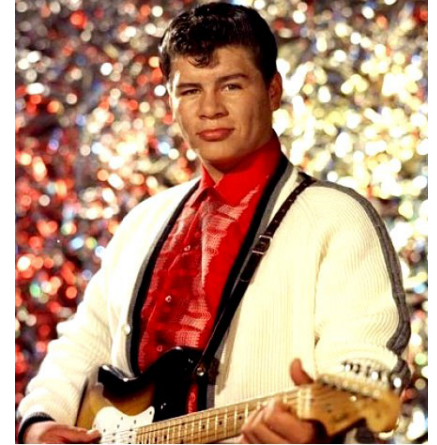
A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the student's answer to question 3.

4. How does *American Bandstand* mirror the theme of conformity in the 1950s? In addition to race, what other examples of conformity do you see?

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the student's answer to question 4.

Biography

Ritchie Valens was born Richard Steven Valenzuela in California in 1941 to Mexican American parents. He grew up in an ethnically diverse neighborhood where he was influenced by many different types of music.



Valens had no formal training but taught himself how to play the guitar and drums. His musical training was a mix of informal lessons by family, friends, and neighbors like veteran and musician Bill Jones Jr., who taught him how to tune a guitar and play a few chords.

In 1957, Valens joined a local band called the Silhouettes while still performing solo at parties and small local events. The next year, he was noticed by producer Bob Keene who became his manager. He recorded his first song “Come On, Let’s Go” and Keene told him to change his name from Valenzuela to Ritchie Valens so the radio station would play it. Keene told Valens that radio stations would see the Mexican name and think it was Mariachi or Mambo music and not listen to it.

Ritchie went on to record “Donna” and “La Bamba”, a remake of a traditional Mexican song in Spanish. He toured the country with these songs and performed on *American Bandstand* twice.

Eight months into the beginning of this musical career, he was killed in a plane crash with Buddy Holly and J.D. “The Big Bopper” Richardson on February 3rd, 1959. Don Mclean memorialized the three men in his song “American Pie” as “the day the music died”.

Even though his music career was short, Valens played a role in changing Rock & Roll by introducing Mexican tunes into popular music. He was part of influencing Mexican culture in California that would be seen in future Rock & Roll songs like “Surfin’ U.S.A” by the Beach Boys.

Listen to Ritchie Valen’s song “La Bamba” here: Watch a clip from American Bandstand through the following link: <https://rb.gy/ciidf>

Questions:

1. What instruments and sounds did you hear in “La Bamba?”

2. How do you think this song was different from what they were playing on *American Bandstand* during the time?

3. What does the fact that Valens manager told him to change his name say about society in the 1950s?

4. How did having Ritchie Valens perform on the show challenge the idea of conformity in the 1950s?

5. Even though they did not allow non-whites to dance on the show until 1965, what do you think *American Bandstand's* role was in broadening American music culture by having people of color perform?