

“Blueberry Hill”—Fats Domino (1956)

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Essay by Howard A. DeWitt (guest post)*



Fats Domino

Fats Domino’s “Blueberry Hill” made rock and roll music a vibrant staple of American popular culture. The irony was it was not a rock ‘n’ roll song. For that reason it was the perfect tune to downplay what some envisioned as rock’s decadence. In 1956, as rock ‘n’ roll was pilloried by every segment of society as dangerous, Antoine “Fats” Domino provided a force for integration and friendly race relations.

“Blueberry Hill” was an unlikely song to usher rock ‘n’ roll into the cultural fray. The Larry Stock-Al Lewis composition was initially sung by Gene Autry in the 1936 movie “The Singing Cowboy.” Glenn Miller, with vocals by Ray Eberle, hit number one with it in 1940. Covers from Kay Kyser, Russ Morgan, Sammy Kay, Gordon Jenkins, Gene Krupa and Jimmy Dorsey followed. Louie Armstrong charted or sold 78s of it in the 1940s. Big bands loved the song with Sammy Kay’s Orchestra, Gordon Jenkins, Gene Krupa, Connee Boswell and Mary Small all recording big band or jazz versions. With six releases of “Blueberry Hill” in 1940 alone, it was identified as a jazz or adult pop song. After Louis Armstrong charted with it in 1949, he teamed up with Bing Crosby the following year to release yet another version.

“Blueberry Hill” was a song for adults until Fats Domino, with his friendly smile, rolling piano style, low-key personality, and smooth concert voice, popularized it. Domino became rock ‘n’ roll’s ambassador with a pop song he turned into a rock masterpiece.

In 1956, when “Blueberry Hill” became Domino’s biggest hit, he was all over the media. He praised the music. He emphasized the happiness of rock ‘n’ roll. “Rolling Stone” ranked Domino’s “Blueberry Hill” as number 82 of the “500 Greatest Songs Of All Time.”

“Blueberry Hill” was recorded on a whim after Domino heard Louis Armstrong’s 1949 version. He told his brother-in-law, Harrison Verrett, he had to teach it to him. When Fats went into the studio to record, he wasn’t satisfied. Neither were the musicians. No one had a copy of the sheet music. No one had the words. The June 1956 session, at the Masters Recorder Studios in Hollywood, was a failure. His producer, Dave Bartholomew, believed Fats would never finish the song. Bartholomew said it was recorded by too many artists. It wasn’t Domino’s style. Imperial Record owner Lew Chudd disagreed. He had the engineer, Bunny Robyn, cobble

together three failed versions into a soft, middle of the road 45, thereby creating rock 'n' roll history. "Blueberry Hill" was the b-side, or non-hit part, of the record with the a-side being "Honey Chile," which he performed in the movie "Shake, Rattle and Rock."

This was Domino's first pop standard ballad selling as much to an adult market as to teens. By the time he recorded "Blueberry Hill," Fats had been a star since 1950 in the African American community. Lew Chudd commented: "Blueberry Hill" allowed the Imperial label to sell a million copies of Domino's records a month.

TELEVISION SELLS BLUEBERRY HILL AND ROCK 'N' ROLL

Television was Domino's medium for defending rock music. On numerous Dick Clark "American Bandstand" appearances, Domino commented on the virtues of rock music as politicians, ministers, classical music enthusiasts and big band aficionados labelled it "Satan's revenge." Carl Perkins said: "In the white honky-tonks where I was playin', they were punchin' 'Blueberry Hill' on the juke box. And white cats were dancing to Fats Domino."

When he appeared on "The Steve Allen Show" on September 6, 1956, he challenged the host's hostile view of rock music. And when Allen realized the new music was good for ratings, he changed his attitude. Allen had embarrassed Elvis Presley by presenting him wearing a tuxedo singing "Hound Dog" to a bored basset hound. Further, Allen made fun of rock 'n' roll by playing the piano while reading lyrics from Gene Vincent's "Be Bop A Lula." He recited them pompously like they were Shakespearian sonnets. But when Domino appeared on Allen's show, he envisioned rock's future. Domino's growing popularity with the adult record buying audience ended Allen's war on rock music. He favored ratings over artistic integrity.

After Fats performed "When My Dreamboat Comes Home" and "I'm In Love Again," Allen presented him with a "Cash Box" Award for Best Rhythm and Blues male vocalist. The dignity with which Fats appeared, and the bonhomie displayed by Allen, went a long way toward bringing African American music into living rooms all over America. The Allen show was pivotal in releasing "Blueberry Hill."

Domino's November 18, 1956 appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show" a.k.a. "The Toast Of The Town" broke "Blueberry Hill" nationally to a white audience. But Sullivan was nervous. He had Domino's band hidden behind a curtain; they were all African American. Pressure to reduce black faces on national television triumphed. Domino remarked: "I figured the night I went on [that] would make 'Blueberry Hill' a hit."

"Blueberry Hill" sold a million 45s the day after the Sullivan appearance. Domino signed a movie deal to appear in "The Girl Can't Help It," featuring Jayne Mansfield, Julie London, Tom Ewell and Edmond O'Brien. It was the first big budget rock and roll movie with him and his band; they prominently performing "Blue Monday." Little Richard was also in the film, as the rock act, and featured three of his songs, "The Girl Can't Help It," "Ready Teddy" and "She's Got It." That was also the story for Chuck Berry who signed movie deals and appeared on major TV shows after Domino broke the color line.

On February, 2, 1957, Domino was a guest on Perry Como's TV show. He performed "I'm In Love Again," "My Heaven" and "Blueberry Hill" in a five-minute segment. Then Domino's banter with Perry drew rapturous applause from the audience. Como's NBC show saw its ratings spike. Fats was then booked for a future Como show. But because of an unwritten ban on featuring rock performers on prime television, Como's producers made the decision to include Domino in general conversation and in the show's skits. Domino's gracious manner and quick wit disarmed the audience. This helped to end the de facto segregation of black voices on prime time television. The Como skits with Fats were light hearted, intelligent and filled with banter about accepting rock music. Como had Fats perform more than one song. This was an answer to Ed Sullivan's racism. Domino's band's black faces were prominently featured with Como asking if the bent horn could be straightened out.

In Domino's second appearance on the Como show, on May 25, 1957, with his band standing behind him, he performed "Valley of Tears" and "It's You I Love" to a national audience just growing accustomed to African American rock 'n' roll. Then Perry and Fats talked about rock and roll. Later, in a skit with teenagers, Domino performed "I'm Walkin.'" In Hollywood, a young Ricky Nelson watched. The son on the "Ozzie & Harriet" TV show, Nelson became a teen idol. He then had a top ten hit with Domino's "I'm Walkin.'" Ironically, Ricky signed with Domino's Imperial label. Lew Chudd quickly released Nelson's cover of "I'm Walking" which charted to number four on "Billboard" in 1957.

African American rock artists appeared frequently on national television after Domino broke this barrier. During the second Como show, Domino took part in another skit. He again traded light banter with the host. This skit featured "teenagers" (who looked like 30 year-old professional dancers) taking over the stage and saw Como ask Domino to play "some of that rock 'n' roll." Domino replied good naturedly: "On no, not on this show. Everybody in the whole house will be rocking." Then Como said: "You don't have to worry everything on this show is under control." That was the signal for the dancers to cheerfully circle Domino, as he sat at the piano performing "I'm Walking." Como was featured prominently in this skit, too, looking happy, but bewildered, by rock music. It was a way of showing his approval of rock music. As he talked about future shows, Como made it clear, rock and roll was now going to be a weekly staple of his show. As Como's program concluded, he went to pop singer Jo Stafford's dressing room. He thanked her for a duet she sang with him. Como asked her if she needed a ride home. Stafford responded by breaking into a version of Domino's "I'm Walking." This went a long way toward marking the acceptance of rock music on national television. Como's ratings skyrocketed.

The Como show ended the ban on major black rock artists appearing on national television. This was due to "Blueberry Hill's" popularity. Como remarked: "This quiet, little show had turned into a rock 'n' roll party." Como's acceptance of rock 'n' roll was a major step forward for the rock genre.

BLUEBERRY HILL'S AND DOMINO'S BAND: FAKE RIOTS AND INTEGRATION

The irony was "Blueberry Hill" was not a song fitting Fat's style. When producer Dave Bartholomew was approached to record it, he told the Imperial label owner, Lew Chudd, it was

“a bad idea.” Bartholomew pointed out “Blueberry Hill” had been a hit for Louis Armstrong in 1949. Fats’ style didn’t fit the song.

When it became Domino’s biggest hit charting at number one on “Billboard’s” rhythm and blues listing and two on the pop listing, Bartholomew was shocked. Chudd observed: “Rock and roll crossed over to the parents thanks to ‘Blueberry Hill.’”

Domino and his New Orleans band left the segregated African American chitlin circuit performing in the movies, large concert halls and eventually landing in Las Vegas. It was the era of Civil Rights and Domino and his band had, an unwitting, but important, contribution to make. As the press debated the rock ‘n’ roll revolution, Domino was a constant media defender. He also played increasingly integrated shows and he was selling as many records as Elvis Presley. Still, the attack on rock ‘n’ roll persisted.

There were four major concert disturbances in 1956 at Domino shows. The press blew teenage exuberance into riots. There were no riots. No one blamed Domino. The media tried to skewer rock ‘n’ roll anyway. In numerous interviews, Fats explained the music had nothing to do with the fighting. It wasn’t a rock ‘n’ roll riot, it was just kids dancing and having fun.

Nevertheless, the integrated crowds, the frenetic dancing, the overflowing concert halls and the abundance of alcohol caught the public’s attention. Newsreels were filled with rock music’s dangers. The reason for the rioting, the critics announced, was the music. Preachers said it was the work of the devil. The Rev. Jimmy Rodgers Snow was featured in newsreels condemning rock music as “anti-God and anti-Christian.” He was a former musician converted to Christianity. Once he became a preacher, he went to war with the “evils of rock music.”

Domino defended his shows. The first so-called rock and roll “riot” occurred on July 7, 1956 at a San Jose, California, appearance. The police tear gassed the local concert hall breaking up fights amongst inebriated patrons. The concert at the Palomar Theater in downtown San Jose was located across the street from where the police department were holding their annual policeman’s ball. The inebriated concert crowd was met by equally inebriated policemen. Then, someone threw firecrackers on the concert floor. The police ran around indiscriminately arresting concert goers. After 50 policeman arrived, the disturbance was contained. The San Jose Police Chief, Ray Blackmore, didn’t blame the music. He said it was the alcohol. It was important as Domino’s first mainstream publicity. He beautifully explained he and the band left the Palomar before the incident. Still, “The pulsating rhythm of Fats Domino” was the culprit, a San Jose newspaper concluded.

As Domino rested in Oakland, in the California Hotel, jazz columnist Ralph J. Gleason interviewed him. Over steak and eggs, Domino explained the incident. Gleason pointed out his rock shows always drew mixed audiences. Integration, Gleason intoned, was on its way at Domino’s concerts.

When Fats was interviewed about a similar incident in Rhode Island, he remarked: “As far as I know it [rock music] makes you happy. I know it makes me happy.” When asked about the fights, Fats said: “When the Navy and Marines get together you have problems.”

“It wasn’t really a race riot,” Herb Hardesty, Domino’s saxophone player continued. “The police called it a race riot. That was ridiculous.”

Sometimes, in the South, the white audience was on one side of a rope, the black audience on the other side. But when the rope came down, kids danced with each other. Local mayors told law enforcement this was fine.

George E. Pitts, an African American columnist for the “Pittsburgh Courier,” noted that Domino brought the races together. In Greensboro, North Carolina, when a young white man attempted to dance with a black woman, Pitts wrote, a riot was reported. There was no riot. It was the press blowing up a small story. What Pitts did write was Domino and his band attracted both black and white audiences. The music accelerated integration.

But when the touring Rhythm and Blues Show of 1956, featuring Fats Domino, Little Richard, Ruth Brown, the Clovers, the Cadillacs, the Turbans and Little Willie John, headed South, however, integration took place. In Memphis, after a whites only show and a black show, white promoters quietly demanded an end to concert segregation. In Roanoke, Virginia, more than 2,000 white teens were allowed to purchase tickets to sit in the balcony for an all-black show. Then some whites went downstairs and began dancing with black patrons. At 1:15 in the morning, someone threw a whiskey bottle toward Fats who was finishing the three and a half hour show. A month later, at a Bill Haley show in Birmingham, Alabama, a protester held a sign: “Rock ‘N’ Roll Breeds Integration.”

“Fats made integration,” Billy Diamond, Domino’s band leader observed. “Fats was the Martin Luther King of music. He brought blacks and whites together.”

“BLUEBERRY HILL” AND DOMINO PAVED THE WAY FOR ROCK ‘N’ ROLL

Fats Domino never received the acclaim of Chuck Berry or Little Richard. He broke down the barriers for them to appear on national TV and in the movies. Whereas Little Richard and Chuck were labeled apostles of a dangerous musical form, Fats was viewed as a safe performer. He became the perfect interview. He extolled rock ‘n’ roll’s place in popular culture.

“Blueberry Hill” was a song parents loved. Fats explained to Dick Clark his version was another way of performing the song. Domino was young. He was only in his late 20s. His conservative demeanor, soft spoken interviews and courtly manners attracted a wide age range at his concerts. His low key defense of rock music made him appear more like the grandfather of rock ‘n’ roll than a founder. He was never a raucous, in-your-face performer. But he did a great deal for Civil Rights.

After Fats, the old days of playing the chitlin’ circuit were over for African American acts. This was all due to “Blueberry Hill” dominating 1956 radio airplay. While rising on “Billboard’s” Pop listing to number two for three weeks, “Blueberry Hill” also topped the “Billboard” Rhythm And Blues chart for 11 weeks.

“Blueberry Hill” was Domino’s best-selling record. With five million copies sold, the song was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame 32 years after its release. This former pop standard, due to Domino’s version, was then covered by Little Richard, Ray Charles, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, the Beach Boys, Loretta Lynn, Cliff Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Andy Williams, Bruce Cockburn and even Led Zeppelin. Domino’s influence went far beyond the US market. Bob Marley commented: “Fats Domino was my first major influence.” Elvis labelled Fats: “The real King of Rock N Roll.” Beatle George Harrison said it was the first rock song he listened to on the radio. Paul McCartney recorded “Ain’t that A Shame” as a tribute to Fats. The Doors’ Ray Manzarek told a BBC Radio 2 program the baseline to “Light My Fire” came from Domino’s “Blueberry Hill.” Leonard Cohen said it was his favorite song. The strangest version of Fats’ hit was when Russia’s Vladimir Putin sang the song on December 10, 2010 at a Moscow charity event.

In the in the cultural mainstream “Blueberry Hill” became a metaphor for the acceptance of 1950s rock ‘n’ roll. When Ritchie Cunningham on the TV show “Happy Days” was asked about his favorite song, he said: “Blueberry Hill.” The Fonz gave it a thumbs up. In St. Louis, Joe Edwards opened a restaurant, Blueberry Hill, where Chuck Berry played once or twice a month until his death at 90. In the 2021 movie “The Eyes of Tammy Faye,” Domino’s “Blueberry Hill” is featured.

“Blueberry Hill” made it possible for Fats to integrate rock music concerts, legitimize rock music as a cultural force and break the color barrier on national television.

Until the day he stopped touring, Fats Domino, the man who scored more hits than any rock pioneer (except Elvis) would coax his audience to “call out anything you want to hear.” Without exception, his audiences would cry out for “Blueberry Hill.”

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.