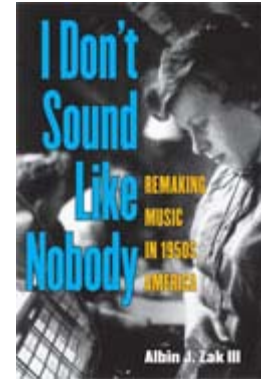


I Don't Sound Like Nobody  
Remaking Music in 1950s America  
Albin J. Zak III  
<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=295986>  
The University of Michigan Press, 2010

## **Q&A with Albin Zak, author of *I Don't Sound Like Nobody: Remaking Music in 1950s America***

The 1950s marked a radical transformation in American popular music as the nation drifted away from its love affair with big band swing to embrace the unschooled and unruly new sounds of rock 'n' roll.

The sudden flood of records from the margins of the music industry left impressions on the pop soundscape that would eventually reshape long-established listening habits and expectations, as well as conventions of songwriting, performance, and recording. When Elvis Presley claimed, "I don't sound like nobody," a year before he made his first commercial record, he unwittingly articulated the era's musical Zeitgeist.



The central story line of *I Don't Sound Like Nobody* is change itself. The book's characters include not just performers but engineers, producers, songwriters, label owners, radio personalities, and fans—all of them key players in the decade's musical transformation.

Written in engaging, accessible prose, Albin Zak's *I Don't Sound Like Nobody* approaches musical and historical issues of the 1950s through the lens of recordings and fashions a compelling story of the birth of a new musical language. The book belongs on the shelf of every modern music aficionado and every scholar of rock 'n' roll.

Albin J. Zak is Professor of Music at the University at Albany, State University of New York. He is the editor of *The Velvet Underground Companion* and the author of *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records*, a groundbreaking study of rock music production. Zak is also a record producer, songwriter, singer, and guitarist.

### ***The University of Michigan Press: What makes the 1950s such an important period in the history of popular music?***

**Albin Zak:** Think about two records: Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters' "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive" (1945) and the Byrds' "Mr. Tambourine Man" (1965). Each was a big hit and each is fairly representative of style trends of the day. But although they are separated by only twenty years, all the records have in common is that they both contain songs. The performance styles, song styles, instrumentation, arrangements, rhythmic feel, and record production are markedly different. The contrast points up basic differences between two defining eras of American pop—swing and rock—separated by this watershed period, the 1950s. That was the decade when fundamental elements of musical style and key aspects of the pop marketplace underwent profound and permanent changes.

### ***UMP: How is rock and roll different from what came before it?***

**AZ:** Rock and roll broadened the spectrum of what counted as musical sound. Industry veterans thought rock records little more than junk—inept in song, arrangement, performance, and production standards.

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And from a conventional perspective, the pros had a point. But the conventions that had long identified songwriters, arrangers, musicians, and producers as “professional” were upended. Audiences embraced lo-fi, amateur records alongside the polished sounds of major-label pop.

Also, ideas about stylistic integrity and authenticity went out the window. Rock and roll borrowed indiscriminately from other idioms and combined elements at will into what seemed to many a musical gibberish. In fact, however, the rampant hybridity was the genesis of a new musical language and a new conception of musical style.

***UMP: How did it change the conventions of music creation and distribution?***

**AZ:** Rock and roll made its sudden, dramatic impact via recordings, the sound of which were hardly reproducible in live settings. Historically, musical creativity, which for pop music meant songwriting and arranging, preceded the recording session. But much of rock and roll’s substance originated in recording venues. Instead of a place to capture fully formed musical conceptions, the studio became a place to develop what were often wispy notions. Musical creativity, then, became a matter not only of writing words and music but of developing and capturing specific performances and sounds.

Also, record production became diffuse and of wildly varying quality. An industry concentrated in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago now saw records emerging from cities and towns throughout the country, produced in all sorts of circumstances. But if the marketplace rewarded a record that sounded amateurish (like Johnny Ace’s “My Song”) or even downright weird (like Don Howard’s “Oh, Happy Day”), the disc was commercially equivalent to any other successful record. It became a legitimate member of the pop lexicon with the potential to influence future attempts at hit-making.

Distribution (retail, juke box, radio) became chaotic. Once reliable marketing formulations fell out of step with actual public behavior. As music intended for a particular demographic began selling to unexpected audiences seeking new musical thrills, the markets grew turbulent and unpredictable, forcing record men to scramble in response to the public’s whims. And because rock and roll was centered in a youth culture, young people gained an unprecedented degree of market influence, which translated ultimately into an aesthetic influence.

***UMP: Who was the person in that decade with the most influence on pop’s transformation?***

**AZ:** There was no one person. It was a widespread cultural process beyond any individual’s control. Moreover, the public was a full participant in the sea change. The most successful individual figures—which by sales tallies were Elvis Presley and Mitch Miller—owed their success not to critics (who were largely skeptical at best) but to mass public acceptance. The fact that one of these characters was a performer deemed the king of rock and roll, while the other was a producer who famously despised it illustrates just how conflicted the decade’s pop music culture was and how its key players resided on both sides of the studio glass.

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***UMP: What is the impact of those changes on today's music?***

**AZ:** We still make records as studio concoctions. Every genre of pop music that's come along since the 1950s is preoccupied with making records. The production practices that developed in the 50s turned record production into something like film making. Records became self-contained artworks concerned primarily with their own narrative imparted through electronic sound reproduction. That is still true. We still live in a stylistically inclusive, aesthetically pliable, intrinsically electronic, and fundamentally democratic musical culture, which is the legacy of the 1950s pop revolution.

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To read more about *I Don't Sound Like Nobody* by Albin Zak, III, visit The University of Michigan Press at <http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=295986>.

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