

1, 2, 3 O'Clock, 4 O'Clock, Rock...

"Rock Around the Clock" started out as a highly-underrated pop song; it wound up being a snapshot of teenage life in the mid-1950's. Written at some point in late 1952, the song almost went nowhere...twice. In winter 1953, songwriter Max Freedman had the song transcribed for the purpose of publishing the music. He sold co-authorship of the song to James Myers (Jimmy DeKnight) in exchange for publishing the song and, one presumes, for seeking an artist to record it. Freedman died in 1962, and Myers' story after that varied, but we know that after registering the copyright for the song, James Myers approached Bill Haley about recording it.

"And what? Haley didn't like it?" Quite the opposite: Bill Haley wanted to record it right away. By this time Haley was having a regional hit with "Crazy, Man, Crazy," and was looking for new material to take his band to the top. According to members of the Comets, the group tested the popularity of the song by introducing it to live audiences. Apparently the first audience to hear "Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley and his Comets was at the Hofbrau Hotel in Wildwood, NJ, in July, 1953. Although the crowds liked it, Haley's producer did not. Dave Miller refused to record "Rock Around the Clock" for Essex Records – apparently because Miller and Myers were not on friendly terms.

Myers' business partner, Jack Howard, pitched the song to Paschall Salvatore Vennitti (better known as Sonny Dae). Sonny Dae recorded two Myers-published songs and released them on the Arcade label in March, 1954. *Billboard* reviewed the single on March 20th, but by April 3rd it was clear that the song wasn't being played outside of Philadelphia (where Sonny had his "dae" job and where Bill Haley also lived). As soon as Bill Haley and the Comets left the Essex label they were picked up by one of the majors: Decca. Decca made a one-year deal for four singles from Haley and the Comets.

According to author Jim Dawson, James Myers was entitled by contract to pick the B-sides of Haley's singles. That way, each single would contain a song that Myers published. His first choice was "Rock Around the Clock," which the Comets recorded on April 12, 1954. Bill Haley recorded two former flops that day; the single's A-side, "Thirteen Women," had just flopped for its author, Dickie Thompson. Decca's Milt Gabler had rewritten the first verse so that it sounded post-apocalyptic; he was convinced that the song ought to be a hit. Haley recorded it, but he disagreed.

With between 30 and 40 minutes left to go in the session, the band had completed the A-side and was ready to move on to the song that they preferred. Danny Cedrone, whose guitar is heard notably in the recording, played his heart out on that one song. The record was reviewed in the May 15th, issue of *Billboard*, and began to get played. Two weeks later, the trade magazines were (rightly) calling "Rock Around the Clock" the A-side. The song started getting played all around the northeast, and the Comets returned to the studio to make their next single.

Decca promoted "Rock Around the Clock" with a few ads, but it couldn't quite break away from status as a regional success. Then the song fizzled out temporarily. Danny Cedrone slipped and fell down a flight of stairs – not living to see how many people would eventually appreciate his work on the song. Jim Dawson explains that one of the buyers of the original Decca single was young Peter Ford, the nine-year-old son of actor Glenn Ford and an avid listener of popular music. Glenn raided his son's record collection for samples of what the kids were listening to, and one of Peter's favorite songs was "Rock Around the Clock." At Glenn Ford's suggestion the song was placed into the soundtrack of *Blackboard Jungle*, which premiered March 19, 1955.

Suddenly, Decca began fielding requests for the song. This time, by mid-May the record had broken onto the national Best Sellers in Stores chart. The band began promoting it again with appearances, and by July 9th it was rock-and-roll's first #1 hit. Perhaps it was as a tribute to Glenn Ford's role in making the song a hit – or perhaps not – but in *Superman: the Movie* (1978) in which Ford appears [as Jonathan Kent], "Rock Around the Clock" is played just before Ford's last scene in the film.

Even though it became a huge hit, Decca Records always seems to have underestimated the song's popularity. How do we know this? Because they had to keep printing new labels – meaning that the previous order for labels was about to run out. There are sixteen (16) known variations of the 78 RPM single and twenty (20) known variations of the 45 RPM single *prior to 1960!* That's insane, right? Well, here they are!

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78 RPM Singles

DJ1 Pink label promo

01 **Black and Gold "Personality Series" label**

Ra Author credits in a wider font

Rb Author credits in a narrow font

01s **Black and Silver "Personality Series" label (style began in mid-October, 1954)**

Ra Author credits in a wider font

Rb Author credits in a narrow font

02 **Black and Silver label with star in center** (style began in December, 1954, but label 01s can be found on some records as late as March, 1956)

Richmond, IN, pressings:

Ra(i) FOX TROT in all caps; very little space above BILL HALEY and above 29124.

Ra(ii) As above, but little space above BILL HALEY and more space above 29124.

Ra(iii) As above, but moderate space above BILL HALEY and above 29124.

Ra(iv) As above, but more space above BILL HALEY and above 29124.

Rb Fox Trot in title case; AND HIS COMETS in all caps

Rc Fox Trot in title case; And His Comets in title case

Gloversville, NY, pressings:

Ga Matrix number at right side (all others have it at left)

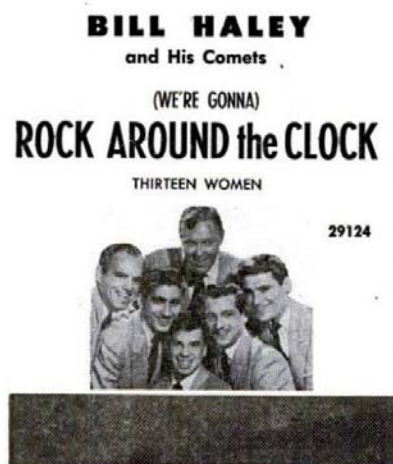
Gb(i) "And His Comets" in title case & wider than "Bill Haley"; blank line above BILL HALEY

Gb(ii) As above, but no blank line above BILL HALEY

Gc AND HIS COMETS in all caps and in a smaller typeface than BILL HALEY

Gd AND HIS COMETS in all caps and in the same size type as BILL HALEY

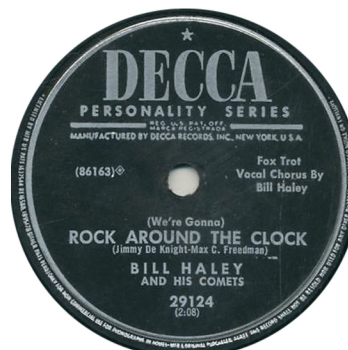
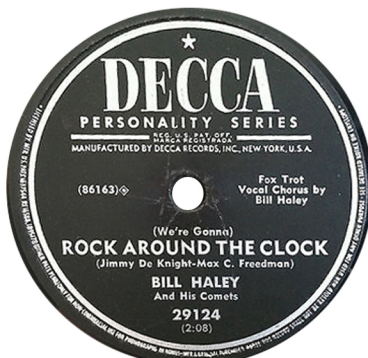
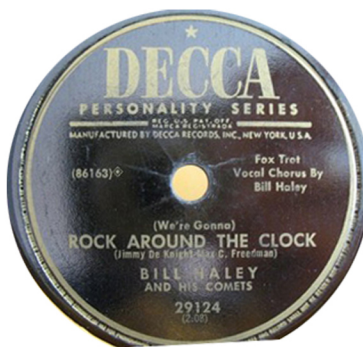
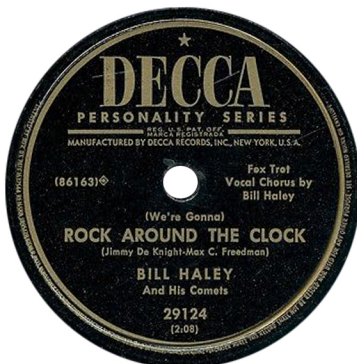
[Excerpts from the May 29, 1954, and August 28, 1954, issues of *Billboard*:]



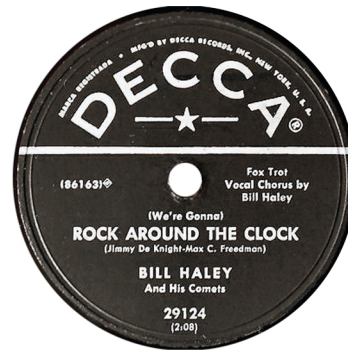
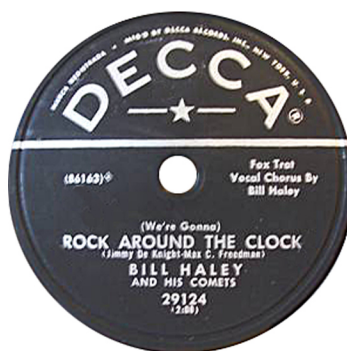
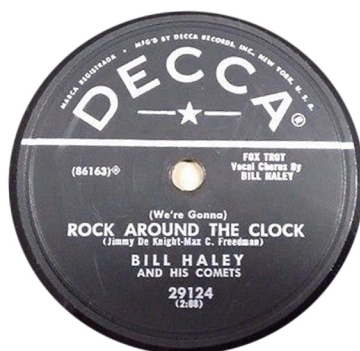
Top Songs

We've been running pretty lucky lately with "Little Things Mean a Lot," "Three Coins in the Fountain," "Stranger in Paradise," "Heart of My Heart," "Wedding Bells," "In the Chapel in the Moonlight," "How Blue?" "Rock Around the Clock," "Shake, Rattle and Roll"; "Hey, There," "The High and the Mighty" and others. But during the dry period that preceded this flow of hits, it was the catalog that paid off the dividends and kept the company in the solid black.

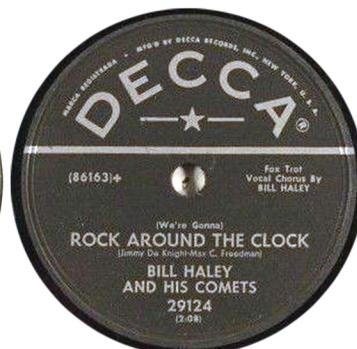
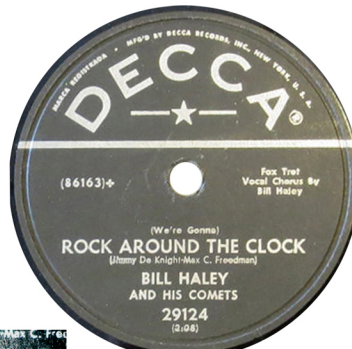
78 RPM, 1954, Richmond



78 RPM, 1955, Richmond



78 RPM, 1955, Gloversville



BILL HALEY

45 RPM Singles

DJ1 Pink label promo; at right is "Non-Breakable Under Normal Use"

01 ***Black and Silver label with 11 concentric arcs to the left and right of DECCA***

Richmond, IN, pressings:

Ra Author credits in a narrow typeface; AND HIS COMETS in all caps

Rb(i) Author credits in a wider typeface; half a blank line under And His Comets. The parentheses are under the C in ROCK and the O in CLOCK.

Rb(ii) As above, but no blank line under And His Comets

Rc Author credits in the wider typeface but smaller. The parentheses are under the K in ROCK and the L in CLOCK.

DJ2 Pink label promo; SAMPLE COPY – NOT FOR SALE under DECCA

02 ***Black and Silver label with a star under DECCA***

Richmond, IN, pressings:

Ra FOX TROT in all caps; AND HIS COMETS is wider than BILL HALEY.

Rb FOX TROT in all caps; B I L L H A L E Y is wider than AND HIS COMETS

The other pressings have Fox Trot in title case.

Rc AND HIS COMETS is in the same typeface and size as BILL HALEY

Rd(i) And His Comets is in title case. No parentheses around song times.

Rd(ii) As above, but the song times are in parentheses.

Gloversville, NY, pressings:

Ga(i) AND HIS COMETS is in the same typeface and size as BILL HALEY; The parentheses in the author credits are under the C in ROCK and the blank space between THE and CLOCK.

Ga(ii) As above, but the parentheses are under the K in ROCK and the C in CLOCK.

Gb AND HIS COMENTS is in the same typeface as BILL HALEY but is smaller in size.

Gc BILL HALEY is in a narrow typeface; AND HIS COMETS is in the regular typeface.

Gd BILL HALEY is in the regular typeface; AND HIS COMETS is in a narrow typeface.

Ge The title and AND HIS COMETS are in a narrow typeface; BILL HALEY is not.

Gf The song title, AND HIS COMETS, and BILL HALEY are all in a narrow typeface.

Gg "And His" is in title case, COMETS is in all caps.

Pinckneyville, NJ, pressings:

Pa The song title, AND HIS COMETS, and BILL HALEY are all in a narrow typeface, and so is the catalog number. (c. 1957-60)

DJ3 Orange label promo; "Promotion copy; not for sale" at right (c. 1961)

DJ4 Pink label promo; MCA rim text (c. 1966-68)



45 RPM, 1954, Richmond



45 RPM, 1955, Richmond



45 RPM, 1955. Gloversville



45 RPM, 1957, Pinckneyville