

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the world of early rock 'n' roll piano! This book will teach you the basic skills you'll need to take your place alongside Fats Domino, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, and the other great rock 'n' roll piano players of the fifties and sixties.

Rock 'n' Roll Piano is divided into three sections. Before you get started, here's the lowdown on what you can expect:

Part 1: What Is Rock 'n' Roll?

This first section aims to put rock 'n' roll in the context of fifties and early sixties music. Throughout, you'll find explanations of the popular music styles of the time, influential artists, producers, and record labels. Investigate some of the suggested listening, and really immerse yourself in the world of rock 'n' roll. (If you want more info, check out some of the Internet resources listed at the end of the chapter.)

Part 2: Rock 'n' Roll Piano Techniques

This next section gets down to the nitty gritty of how to play rock 'n' roll piano. You'll learn all the essential left-hand patterns, chord progressions, and specialized right-hand techniques—glissandos, crushed notes, note clusters, etc.—that will get you sounding like a true rock 'n' roller. We'll also discuss how to practice, as well as the basics of how to solo in rock 'n' roll.

Part 3: Style File

In this last section, you'll find six complete rock 'n' roll tunes in different styles. By this point, you'll have learned all the skills, techniques, and tricks you need to be able to play each of these tunes—so go for it. Start “ripping it up”!

This book assumes that you are already familiar with the basics of piano, that you can read music without too much difficulty, and that you can play “hands together” to a reasonable standard. If you can do this, then nothing in these pages should be beyond you.

If at any point you start to feel disheartened or discouraged, remember that many of the great rock 'n' roll pianists were self-taught. They came up with their own techniques and individual styles to suit their particular way of playing, and you can do the same. If you find certain techniques difficult or awkward, then you don't have to use them—that's the beauty of rock 'n' roll!

About the CD

On the CD, you'll find demonstrations of all the examples as well as backing tracks that you can play along with. First listen to the demo track to hear your part and how it fits in with the whole band, then play along with the backing track (full band, minus piano) when you're ready. Some examples also have slow and fast (full-speed) versions. All CD tracks have a one-bar count-in.

Piano, keyboard, and organ: Andy Vinter

Guitar, bass, and drums: Martin Smith

Saxophone: Martin Williams

Trumpet: Mark White

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The Right Hand

In rock 'n' roll, the right hand has two main functions:

- To propel the song forward through driving rhythmic patterns
- To make the part more interesting through embellishing licks and phrases, effects, and general showmanship!

In the fifties and early sixties, piano solos were rare on rock 'n' roll records, with the solo instrument of choice more likely to be a saxophone, so an important secondary role for the pianist was to be able to accompany the soloist in a sensitive manner.

Rock 'n' Roll Eighths

One of the most enduring images of the rock 'n' roll era has to be Jerry Lee Lewis hammering out those frenetic right-hand chords at the top of the keyboard. Jerry knew that this simple technique was guaranteed to inject huge amounts of energy and excitement into any song, and indeed, his right-hand parts frequently consisted of little else.

Try this simple sequence, which combines a classic left-hand pattern that you've come across already, with repeated eighth notes high in the right hand—you've paid for those dusty keys at the top of the keyboard, so why not use them!



TRACK 19 Demo (slow)

TRACK 20 Backing Track (slow)

You can really hammer the eighth notes, but be careful not to let your wrist lock up, as this will prevent you from playing these patterns at high speed, as well as potentially damaging your hand and wrist. Most of the action should come from the wrist and not from your arm.

Once you're happy at a slower tempo, try speeding things up a bit:



ROCK 'N' ROLL TECHNIQUES NO. 2

Crushed Notes

The relationship between rock 'n' roll piano playing and rock 'n' roll guitar playing is a close one—for example, Chuck Berry was heavily influenced by his piano player Johnnie Johnson, while many licks and accompaniment patterns are common to both instruments.

However, there are some things that you can do on a guitar that simply can't be done on the piano. One such technique is known as *string bending*, where the guitarist bends the string with his fretting hand, causing the pitch of the note to rise.

Because the piano can only play discrete pitches (it can play F or F \sharp , but it can't play any of the microtones in between), it's impossible to accurately reproduce this effect. However, with a little bit of ingenuity, the rock 'n' roll pianist can get close—by literally crushing in an extra (very short) note. Over time, this has become an accepted part of the rock 'n' roll sound in its own right, and is an essential part of any rock 'n' roll pianist's repertoire of techniques.

In this example, a C \sharp is crushed in front of a bar of eighth notes. Although the notation shows that the crushed note appears before the D and G notes, in practice, the C \sharp and G are played at the same time, with the C \sharp sliding swiftly to the D.



TRACK 35
Demo



TRACK 36
Backing Track

Practice the right hand without the crushed note using your second and fifth fingers for the D and G notes, respectively. Then, practice hitting C \sharp and G together with the same two fingers, sliding your second finger from C \sharp to D as quickly as possible. Finally, put the two elements together and practice along with Track 36.



TRACK 37
Demo



TRACK 38
Backing Track

Now try this example, which includes two crushed notes per bar: