



JOURNALISM PROFESSOR WILLIAM MCKEEN HAS
SPENT HIS CAREER CHRONICLING ROCK 'N' ROLL

BY STEVE ORLANDO

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PHOTOGRAPHY
BY GRAHAM MCKEEN



In many ways, 1954 represented a time of American social, political and cultural convergence.

In Washington, D.C., the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the civil rights case that effectively ended school segregation. Bill Haley and his Comets released “Rock Around the Clock.” In Memphis, Tenn., a 19-year-old truck driver named Elvis Presley was cutting his first records.

In Indianapolis, Ind., William McKeen was born.

A clarification here: McKeen, chair of the University of Florida Department of Journalism, would never place his own arrival in the world alongside the first three events. But the connections are undeniable. Indeed, the other three items are at the very core of McKeen’s career, one that has led directly to his alternate sobriquet: Doc Rock.

A bona fide baby boomer, McKeen, 49, has intertwined his generation’s life experience with his own academic specialties: journalism and the history of rock ‘n’ roll. Knowing — not to mention teaching — the latter entails far more than memorizing liner notes and band trivia, although there’s room for plenty of both.

Naturally, his office walls in Weimer Hall are hung with the kind of items you might expect — a Bob Marley poster, a clock with a swing-hipped Elvis. But look at the bookshelves and there lie the telltale signs of his research endeavors.

For instance, “Rock and Roll is Here to Stay: An Anthology.” McKeen was the editor, and the list of contributing writers reads like a greatest-hits manifest: James Brown, Bob Dylan, Brian Wilson, Pete Townsend and Tina Turner, not to mention writers such as Tom Wolfe and Salman Rushdie. The book was included in a gift basket handed out to hosts of the 2001 Grammy Awards.

Some other examples: “Bob Dylan: A Bio-Bibliography,”

“The Beatles: A Bio-Bibliography” and from the literary journalism realm, McKeen’s other specialty, works on Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson.

As jobs and academic specialties go, many would agree it’s exceptionally cool — and McKeen is the first to admit it. It’s an ironic place to be for a guy who’s counting calories and contemplating buying his first minivan, but his niche and his style have earned praise from colleagues and students alike.

Terry Hynes, dean of the College of Journalism and Communications, describes McKeen as “an absolutely phenomenal teacher.”

“With his specialty in rock ‘n’ roll,” Hynes says, “he’s able to connect the generations.”

Twenty years ago, she says, deans and department chairs often found themselves defending popular culture studies programs similar to McKeen’s.

“That’s not the way it is anymore,” she says. “You have these core values and you have to find a way to teach them.”

Whether the vehicle is Plato or Janis Joplin may not be as important as getting the material across in a way that’s relevant. “Learning doesn’t have to be sad work,” Hynes says. “It can be fun.”

Al Tritico agrees.

“He was a major selling point for me to come here,” says Tritico, a doctoral student for whom McKeen has served as adviser for about a year. Tritico, 32, says he looked at about a half dozen other programs before discovering McKeen during an online search. The New Orleans native knew instantly he’d found an ideal match for his own research interest — the history and culture of jazz — as well as his writing style.

“What I like is that he writes stuff that will be read outside the ivory tower,” Tritico says. “He’s something of an iconoclast, but he’s proven himself.”

Rock 'N' Roll Roots

McKeen spent part of his childhood in England and Germany, where his father, an Air Force flight surgeon, was stationed. Even then McKeen was somewhat cognizant of the history surrounding him. Not Europe's great cathedrals and statues, but the kind that was in the making.

"I guess I grew up in a great time," he says. "I certainly can remember the arrival of the Beatles, but my memory goes back before that. I remember when we were stationed with the military in Europe and there were riots over Bill Haley and his Comets. One of my first memories is my father talking about those crazy German music fans. And we had been away from the States for so long that when we came back we realized, 'Oh, that's going on over here, too.'"

His father actually played an even more direct role in shaping his psyche.

"I have real eclectic taste in that I grew up with a father who used to turn on the 'Flying Dutchman Overture' by Wagner at 6 in the morning," he says. "That was his way of waking up the house instead of an alarm clock."

As a teen, McKeen discovered the allure of writing about music "kind of in the way a lot of people I know in journalism got into journalism. They loved sports and they thought, 'Wow, I can write about it and get paid?' That was kind of my revelation. I really liked this music and I could write about it and get paid, and get free records."

He got his first gig in 1969, as a music columnist for the Bloomington, Ind. *Courier-Tribune*. His first album review was The Beatles' "Abbey Road."

Almost immediately, he recognized his limitations.

"Obviously, I was ignorant," McKeen says. "I didn't know any-

thing about rock 'n' roll history, so I taught myself. I read some of the best books about rock history ... and it was slim pickins."

Subsequent journalism jobs would include editing positions at the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *American Spectator* and the *Palm Beach Post*. But he still felt the need for a deeper understanding. After finishing a master's degree in mass communication at Indiana University, McKeen joined the journalism faculty at Western Kentucky University in 1977. He moved on to the University of Oklahoma journalism faculty in 1982 and subsequently earned his doctorate there in higher education administration.

He came to UF in 1986 and began teaching an undergraduate course on the history of journalism. In 1993, he revamped an honors class on the history of rock 'n' roll. That's when it all began to gel.

Once again, his life experiences came into play. They became his curriculum.

"I think I grew up really affected by the civil rights movement because that was happening right then," he says, adding that his family lived and traveled extensively through the South during that period. "So all these things were kind of together in my mind, and what I've come to see is that, symbolically, the merger of black and white America was occurring at the same time on the radio as it was occurring at lunch counters and in schools or whatever, and of course a lot of people would say rock 'n' roll was just black music that had been taken over by white musicians, and I think to a certain degree that's true."

As McKeen explains it to his students, black music — rhythm and blues — and white music — country/western, known then as hill-billy music — merged. The result was a stepchild whose descendents include everyone from Chubby Checker to Green Day.



Blues man Lil' Howlin' Wolf at the King's Palace Café in Memphis, Tenn.



A Bob Dylan poster peers from the front window of Dylan's boyhood home in Hibbing, Minn.

Fans leave guitar picks and tips on the headstone of blues man Charley Patton, whose grave is in a cotton field near Holly Ridge, Miss.

“The coming of rock ‘n’ roll was kind of white America’s recognition of black America,” McKeen says, “and even though white Americans were getting it in diluted form, they were kind of getting the message, getting the style, getting the beat.”

Before radio, the white establishment had a relatively easy job of keeping the races separated. “But radio was subversive in that radio didn’t recognize any of those boundaries,” he argues.

“Of course, there’s the classic example of young Elvis Presley growing up poor and white in Memphis, and he hears the radio and hears blues,” he says. “And there’s Chuck Berry in St. Louis, a young man trying to make his way and he turns on the radio and hears country and western. So Chuck Berry was really influenced by the narrative quality of country-and-western, and Elvis Presley, although a product of poor white trash country and western America, was influenced by the beat of rhythm and blues.”

McKeen apologizes occasionally for sounding like he’s giving a lecture, but it’s a natural patter for him to slip into. He did it regularly during the research that resulted in his latest book, “Highway 61.”

“It was sort of like teaching a class,” McKeen says, “but my son was the only pupil.”

Released in March 2003, “Highway 61” chronicles the three-and-a-half-week voyage of McKeen and his college-age son, Graham, along the stretch of pavement made famous by Bob Dylan’s 1965 album, “Highway 61 Revisited.”

ROAD TRIP

In an already-road-weary 1997 Ford Explorer nicknamed the War Wagon, the pair officially began the trip at Highway 61's headwater in Thunder Bay, Ontario, bound for its terminus in New Orleans. The real estate in between is a canvas of beyond-eclectic music, roadhouses, barbecue stands, historic landmarks, natural wonders, roadside oddities, one-of-a-kind characters and talk — lots of talk, the kind one expects as a father takes inventory of his relationship with his first-born son as he steps into manhood.

The story really begins long before, though, when McKeen became a long-distance dad working in Gainesville in the mid-1980s and making a monthly drive to see Graham and his two sisters, who lived with their mother in Indiana.

McKeen and his children were close during those intervening years, but as Graham approached manhood, McKeen sensed a looming deadline.

"I really did feel like this may be my last chance to do this with him," he says.

The journey became, in part, a cross-generational cultural exchange program. McKeen brought along an ample sampling of his CD collection — plenty of Bob Dylan, of course, as well as Tony Bennett, Led Zeppelin and the Grateful Dead, to name a few. Graham, who turned 19 during the journey, reciprocated with his own faves — Radiohead, Phish, Mos Def and Jurassic 5.

With that soundtrack, the two set off on what McKeen describes in the book as a "free-fall" along the Mississippi River.


While there were a few low points in the trip, McKeen says, the highlights still stand out in vivid relief. Like visiting Dylan's boyhood

home in Hibbing, Minn., and spooking around in some of his old haunts. Or spending an afternoon in St. Louis at Blueberry Hill, a bar steeped in proprietor Joe Edwards' own collection of rock 'n' roll memorabilia and home of the world's greatest jukebox. And then there was the lucky catch of a blazing performance by legendary surf guitar king Dick Dale, also in St. Louis, and getting to chat with him briefly afterward.

The trip takes on a more somber and reverent tone as the two see rural Mississippi against the backdrop of McKeen's childhood memories of the 1960s civil rights movement. With blues men Robert Johnson and Charley Patton providing the music, they frequently found themselves seemingly the only white people for miles, something McKeen says gave Graham a healthy new perspective on the world, as well as a new appreciation for his father.

"He's responsible for introducing me to the world of good music," says Graham, now a 21-year-old senior majoring in environmental management at Indiana University. As for spending that much time with his dad, "I found out things about him I didn't know, and things about his dad I didn't know because he (McKeen) was my age when he died. That trip was really special. I'll definitely take that to the grave."

And for McKeen, it provided a fresh new take on just about everything.

"Even though I wrote a book about it, it still feels like a secret only the two of us share," McKeen says. "It was a great opportunity that I recognize few people get: to bring my life and my work together and share all of that with my son." 

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Graham McKeen.

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GRAHAM MCKEEN

A BBQ joint in Mississippi.

