Building Blocks of Music

Background

Music has four important building blocks: rhythm, pitch, color (or timbre), and volume. Musicians have many ways to arrange these pieces, just as there are many ways to build a tower out of toy blocks. Each element has specific properties that can be controlled.

*Rhythm* is an organized pattern of sound in time. An important element of rhythm is the beat—the steady, continuous pulse that drives the music. Rhythms can also fall between and across those beats. Both “Bo Diddley” and “Wipeout” have distinctive rhythmic patterns that repeat.

*Pitch* refers to how high or low a tone is. In “Rock Around the Clock,” Bill Haley’s voice goes down in pitch when he repeats “rock, rock, rock.” He also ends the chorus lower than when the chorus started. “Around” is sung to a higher pitch than “tonight.”

*Color* (or timbre) is the unique, distinct quality of an instrument or voice. In “Green Onions,” the bass guitar has a rich, deep sound. The electric organ and the electric guitar have brighter sounds. In “Peter Gunn,” the rough, growling saxophone stand apart from the smooth, driving bass guitar.

*Volume* describes how musical sounds range from loud to quiet. In “Long, Long, Long,” the music starts quietly and gets louder. In “Shout,” the singer calls out the volume changes when he sings to get “a little bit louder” or “a little bit softer now.”

Playlist

**Rhythm**
- Bo Diddley, “Bo Diddley” (1955)
- The Ventures, “Wipeout” (1965) from *The Ventures on Stage*

**Pitch**
- Bill Haley, “Rock Around the Clock” (1954)
- Bill Haley and His Comets, “Shake, Rattle, and Roll” (1954)

**Color**
- Booker T. and the M.G.’s “Green Onions” (1962) from *Green Onions*
- Duane Eddy, “Peter Gunn” (1960)

**Volume**
- The Isley Brothers, “Shout” (1959)
- The Beatles, “Long, Long, Long” (1968) from *The Beatles*