



# Atomic Culture

## Introduction

On December 18, 1950, President Harry S. Truman authorized the establishment of a continental testing site on a 680-square mile section of the Nellis Air Force Gunnery and Bombing Range. First known as the Nevada Proving Grounds, it officially became the Nevada Test Site in 1955, opening the door to an atomic testing age that not only affected national security, but national culture as well. Today it is called the Nevada National Security Site (NNSS).



## The Ranger test series

At the commencement of Operation Ranger in 1951, the first test series at the Nevada Test Site, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal's* headline declared "VEGAS A-BOMB POPS!" During the Ranger series of tests, the skies were lit up as far away as Los Angeles and headlines around the world announced each shot to a world both awed and intrigued by the power of atomic energy.

*Ordinary products such as candy, sewing needles, and dinnerware reflect the extent of the atomic influence.*



## A cultural phenomenon

Public interest increased each time the Nevada sky was illuminated by atomic detonations. During the Tumbler-Snapper series, in 1952, the entire nation witnessed an atomic blast from the comfort of their homes as the media provided live television coverage to the American public.



As Americans witnessed the first televised atomic blast, atomic fever swept the country, reflected in a variety of curious cultural phenomena. The Washington Press Club was offering a gin and Pernod concoction dubbed the "Atomic Cocktail." Los Angeles burlesque establishments were promoting "Atom Bomb Dancers," and a New York jewelry company was selling "atomic inspired pin and earring sets" that were "as daring to wear as it was to drop the first atom bomb." Even KIX Cereal was advertising its Atomic Bomb Ring which it was offering to kids for 15 cents and a cereal box top. From china patterns to comic books, the atomic influence was evident in even the smallest minutiae of American life.

Clocks to lamps to corporate logos soon adopted what came to be known as "atomic style" into their work. It was a form of design that commonly included rays and spheres simulating the path of electrons around the nucleus of an atom. Even the American teenager, the barometer of popular culture, adopted the expression 'atomic' as a means of declaring something good. Businesses seized upon this unprecedented cultural awareness and set about harnessing the energy of the atom for strictly commercial purposes.

Between 1951-1962 atomic tests at the Nevada Test Site affected popular films, novels, music, television, art, and advertising. Hundreds of titles of popular songs mention the atom bomb in one form or another, as did many strange movies and pulp novels that used atomic war or testing as their main plot points.



## Atomic Hit Parade

**ATOMIC TELEPHONE** (1951) by the Spirit of Memphis Quartet  
**PRELUDE TO OBLIVION (ATOMIC STYLE)** (1951) by Alexander Brott  
**WHEN THEY DROP THE ATOM BOMB** (1951) by Jackie Doll and his Pickled Peppers  
**ATOMIC BABY** (1953) by Linda Hayes w/ the Red Callender Sextette  
**ATOMIC CHRISTMAS** (1954) by Samuel Adam Short, Jr.  
**ATOMIC KISS** (1954) by Earney Vandagriff  
**ATOMIC LOVE POLKA** (1954) by Ray Henry  
**13 WOMEN (and Only One Man in Town)** (1954) by Bill Haley and his Comets  
**YOU HIT ME BABY LIKE AN ATOMIC BOMB** (1954) by Fay Simmons  
**ATOM BOMB** (1955) by Glenn Barber  
**ATOMIC BOUNCE** (1955) by Johnny Latorre  
**50 MEGATONS** (1956) by Sonny Russell  
**ATOM BOMB BABY** (1957) by The Five Stars  
**ATOMIC LOVE** (1957) by Little Caesar with the Red Callender Sextette  
**ATOMIC FALLOUT** (1958) by Bobby Mizzell with Jerry Woodard and the Co's  
**ATOMIC NIGHTMARE** (1958) by the Talbot Brothers of Bermuda  
**A-BOMB BOP** (1959) by Mike Fern  
**ATOMIC ENERGY** (1959) by Jimmy Womack  
**FALLOUT!** (1959) by Henry Mancini  
**ROCK AND ROLL ATOM** (1959) by Red McCoy with the Sons of the Soil  
**ATOMIC BLUES** (1961) by Fender Slim  
**ATOMIC ENERGY CALYPSO** (1962) by Neville Marcano  
**LOVE THAT BOMB** (1964) by Dr. Stangelove and the Fallouts



*Hundreds of popular music titles capitalized on the 'atomic boom.'*

Blues, jazz, gospel, rock and country musicians embraced atomic energy with artistic enthusiasm. Musicians churned out a variety of truly memorable tunes featuring some of the strangest lyrics of the 20th century.

The movie industry was also quick to jump on the atomic bandwagon. "Them!" was the saga of ants mutated to huge proportions by an atomic blast in the New Mexico desert. In "The Beast From 20 Thousand Fathoms," instead of an atomic mutation, a prehistoric monster was released from its icy prison by a nuclear bomb detonated at the pole. And in perhaps the most famous movie to use atomic testing as a plot point, "Godzilla," was a 400-foot prehistoric monster that spawned innumerable sequels and remakes, attempting to make a serious statement about the dangers of nuclear bombs and the effects of radiation.

### Conclusion

The word "atomic" became an adjective that was short hand for anything powerful or modern. Atomic Cab Companies, Atomic Cities, the Atomic Lanes Bowling Alley, and, of course, the Atomic Cocktail are but a few examples of the linguistic fad that lingers on to this very day as is evident in popular children's cartoons and Hollywood movies.



*Produced in Japan in 1954, "Godzilla" delivered a somber message about the dangers of nuclear testing.*

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