

Good Old Rock n' Roll

A Look Back at Alan Freed

...The Moondog

by Henry Niedzwiecki

Alan Freed - The Moondog

Growing up in Cleveland and being a teen during the '50s, I consider a definite advantage when it comes to the knowledge of early Rock-N-Roll. Perhaps you were there too and this story rekindles some memories for you.

Alan Freed, born Albert James Freed in 1922, graduated from Ohio State as an engineer. He started his career as a disc jockey in 1945 at WAKR in Akron. In May of 1951 he tried to play records on television station WXEL Channel 9 in Cleveland. That idea didn't work but Alan stayed with the station to host the afternoon movie. In July of 1951 he started his late hour radio show originally known as the "Moondog House" or "Moondog Show."

Alan was certainly different with his show. Never before did a white DJ play "race music or sepiä." When they found out, he had our parents "going ape." The Moondog was on from 11:15 p.m. 'til 2:30 a.m. Saturday nights on WJW. I can still remember the start of the show - first the howling of a dog and then the theme song "Blues For A Red Boy" by Todd Rhodes and then music by request. And music it was indeed! For the first time, we heard music that had a real beat.

But Alan still had not hit the full attention of our parents until Saturday, March 21, 1952, when they opened the Plain Dealer and found out there was a RIOT at the Arena on Friday night. The "Moondog Coronation Ball" turned into a disaster. Bylines read: Warrants Brought in Blues Ball Brawl. Supposedly 8,700 tickets sold at the door, plus another 6,000 advance ticket sales, plus the others who wanted in was just too much for the fire and police departments to handle. It certainly didn't help that Alan promised but did not book the Orioles. Listed on the bill of performers were: The Tiny Grimes Band, Paul Williams, the Dominoes (formerly the Royals), Baretta Dillard and Donnie Cogg. Yes the old Moondog made some serious waves.

Then it was 11:15 p.m. Saturday, March 22nd, 1952, the radios were quietly turned on and we were listening for the "Moondog Howl" - it didn't come. Instead we heard a rather somber Alan Freed telling us his version of what happened at the Arena the night before. He told us that "for the first hour, 9,700 people were inside enjoying the show when 7,000 who were outside, smashed in the doors and converged inside. The whole show went out of control." Alan talked for about ten minutes finally asking that when you called in your request, please tell Dean (Barlo) that you are for the Moondog.

The Moondog Show finally started that night and the response was overwhelming. Not only did they call but they came down to the studio and even sent telegrams. The station management must have been on hand because within an hour a new Moondog, who was upbeat, alive, and on Cloud 9 was telling us that starting March 24th, 1952 there would be a Moondog Matinee at 11:15 'til 2:00 a.m. and on Saturdays 'til 3:00 a.m. He thanked his "Moondoggers" for sticking with him through thick and thin, along with his sponsors Erin Brew the Standard Beer, and Record Rendezvous.

Welcome: The birth of Rock-N-Roll. One night while playing one of Bill Haley's tunes (yes, he also played white music) originally released in '52, called Rock-A-Beating-Boogie, Alan pounding on a telephone book, keeping time, heard "Rock, Rock, Rock, Everybody, Roll,

Roll, Roll, Everybody" and well, according to Bill Haley, "he coined the phrase Rock-N-Roll" when referring to his kind of music. In this sense, you can say, Cleveland really gave birth to Rock-N-Roll.

Okay, so that's how the phrase got coined, or did it? Certainly Alan got around. He was very often seen at night in bars on the eastside because he was known to black and white alike as a friend. The terms rockin and rollin and reelin and ballin were just a few that really were euphemisms used by the black community to refer to the sex act. Yes, you can finally dust off those old records and listen to the real meaning behind some of the lyrics.

At any rate, Alan would wait 'til about 1:30 a.m. when he thought the station manager was probably asleep, and play some of the really "dirty recordings." Song like "Work With Me Annie" by the Midnighters and other "Annie" songs and the Dominoes with "60 Minute Man" and Shirley and Lee's "Let the Good Times Roll." Yes, some of these songs were a lot more than suggestive, that is, if you know what the words meant.

Alan had another "Ball" at the Arena in May of 1952 called the Maytime Ball. He had a heck of a time getting the permits but he was determined to make good on the first show. This time the Arena would only sell 6,000 tickets per show. There were three shows and this time there would be an extra 50 special police.

We continued to see Alan nurturing his baby. If you dust off those oldies, you can even find his name as writer of several records. Some were legitimate and some were later found to be a way to make a payoff for playing a record. No matter what, he was one of the first to find a base which brought both black and white together. Music, dancing, the heavy beat. Not only at shows but at local dance halls, Alan appeared with guest stars as did many other DJs in Cleveland. He may have been the first but he certainly would not be the last. However, the freelance DJ would do his last Moondog House show for WJW on September 4th, 1954.

Cleveland's loss is New York's gain. On September 6th, 1954, Alan started broadcasting at WINS, an independent 50,000 watt station. Of course it didn't hurt to offer him a \$75,000 annual income guarantee. He was also slated to be syndicated to 40 markets across the country. The DADDY-O of Rock-N-Roll finally hit the big time at age 32. In fact, he had a kind of a test market show for New York even before contracts were signed. On May 1st, 1954, he hosted the Moondog Affair, another stage show in Newark, N.J.

He did so well in the New York area, that he started to make movie appearances for Paramount Pictures. The big-

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Alan Freed, Moon Dog Ball

gest of which was the Rock-n-Roll movie, "Don't Knock the Rock." This netted him \$29,000 per day. His co-stars were Bill Haley and the Comets, the Treniers, Little Richard, Allen Dale and Dave Appell. That was in February of 1957. When asked about Times Square he was quoted as saying "it ain't square - man, it rocks." Other movies included "Rock, Rock, Rock" and "Rock Around the Clock."

New York and the east coast had its ups and downs for the old Moondog. May of 1958 he defied a ban on Rock-N-Roll and put on a show in New Haven, Conn. In early November of 1959 another stage show in Boston turned into a riot. Riot charges against him were later dropped. His worst nightmare happened on November 26th, 1959, when Alan's TV show the Big Beat (WNEW, NY), two detectives served him with a subpoena to appear before the N.Y. District Attorney to answer questions about PAYOLA. Alan was fired from the TV station for refusing to deny he took payola. By 1958 he was working for WABC radio N.Y. which also dropped him like a hot potato.

Alan could not find a job for quite awhile and moved from city to city at smaller stations. In 1962 he pleaded guilty two counts of commercial bribery deriving from the payola scandal and received a six month suspended sentence and a \$300 fine.

Not enough trouble for him, in March

of 1964 the N.Y. Federal Grand Jury indicted the Palm Springs, Calif. man on a charge of evading \$37,000 in income taxes. This was for the years, 1957, 1958 and 1959. Alan died on January 20th, 1965 of uremia at age 42.

So just what did Alan accomplish in his short lifetime? First, he showed he was ahead of many by not being prejudiced. Again, he would not play white copies of black music but would also play original white rock-n-roll. The man was instrumental in the Birth of Rock - the "blending" of Boogie Woogie Blues-Jazz-Pop-Rhythm-n-Blues-Gospel and Country and Western. Because of this many of us old Doo Whoppers are very diversified in the music that we listen to today.

With regard to "Payola," this writer would like to point out that although it was morally wrong, it was not actually illegal until 1960. So, how he was sentenced and fined in 1962 for Payola is beyond me. Our constitution, ex post facto, says that we don't make laws to fit the crime after the crime has been committed. But somehow they did. Many of our best DJs were hurt by this scandal and could have been told not to do it again and not been fired as they were. But that's past history.

Norm N Nites, Dance Contest Finals, October 30th, 1993, 8 p.m., \$12.00, Statler Hotel, 12th & Euclid, Capris & Johnny Maestro & Brooklyn Bridge.