

SPRING/
SUMMER
2002

LINER NOTES

ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM



David Byrne And the 2002 Inductees

Alan Freed's Moondog Madness

Ahmet Ertegun's Labor Of Love

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M A D N E S S

WHAT IS COMMONLY REFERRED TO AS the first rock concert took place in Cleveland 50 years ago, on March 21, 1952, when rhythm & blues disc jockey Alan Freed staged his Moondog Coronation Ball at the Cleveland Arena. The event drew a crowd of 25,000 or more, but ultimately had to be called off when thousands of fans without tickets crashed the gate. No one was more surprised at the size of the crowd than Freed, who had advertised the dance heavily on his local radio program, but hardly anywhere else.

Since his childhood, music had left an indelible mark on Freed, who was born near Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in December 1921, and raised in Salem, Ohio, about 50 miles southeast of Cleveland. One of Freed's uncles was a professional vaudevillian who taught him to play the trombone. As a teenager during the Swing Era, Freed was captivated by the spirited music of his idol, Benny Goodman. While in high

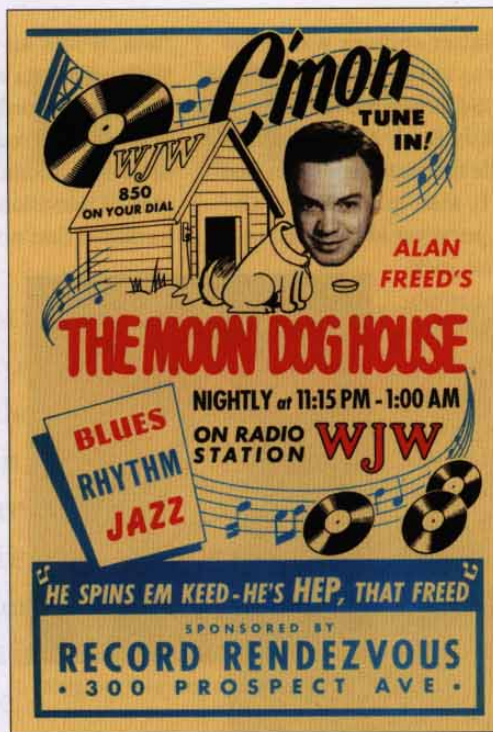
school, Freed led a local band called the Sultans of Swing. He also read news accounts of Goodman's concerts at New York's famous Paramount Theater and fantasized about the day he would lead his own band on Broadway.

Freed also developed an avid interest in radio, which, in 1942, led to an announcing job in New Castle, Pennsylvania. He moved to progressively larger markets, first to Youngstown, Ohio, then to Akron, and finally on to Cleveland. It was there, in 1951, that Freed, at the behest of the owner of one of the city's leading record shops, began hosting a program of rhythm & blues records. Adopting the on-air persona "Moondog," Freed took to the airwaves on

WJW Radio, baying like a hound in heat. As he spun his rhythm & blues platters, he left his microphone open, singing along to the music and enhancing the beat by slamming his hand on a telephone book.

The following year Freed staged his now-famous Moondog Coronation Ball. Mirroring the disc jockey's radio audience at the time, the throngs of fans who appeared at the Cleveland Arena that night were predominantly black. During the next several years, however, Freed's audience grew whiter, and the music he played gained a new name. Freed originally described his program as a "rock and roll session with blues and rhythm records," but before long he was calling the music itself "rock and roll."

Freed at WAKR in Akron, Ohio, c.1950 (left); poster advertising Freed's Cleveland radio show, c. 1952 (right).



ALAN FREED

and the Birth of Rock and Roll

BY JOHN A. JACKSON

The egocentric platter spinner was never satisfied unless he was at the heart of things, and in the fall of 1954 Freed moved to New York, where his nightly Rock And Roll Party on WINS Radio made the station number one in the Big Apple. It also made Freed the world's number one purveyor of rock and roll. It was during the disc jockey's groundbreaking promotion of a dance in January 1955 that the recording industry was forced to take notice of the phenomenon Freed had unleashed. He billed the black performers scheduled to appear at the event as "rock and roll stars," causing the music trade papers to first use the phrase "rock and roll" to describe such a musical event. Weeks later, in those same publications, record companies began advertising "rock and roll" records.



"Hello everybody, how y'all tonight?"

Freed was also the first individual to undertake a majority of the promotional methods that, over the next three decades, would traditionally be employed by the rock industry. Among them were live concerts (fulfilling his boyhood dream, Freed brought rock and roll to Broadway, with a 1957 stage show at the New York Paramount); national radio broadcasts (Freed had the first live network radio rock and roll program, which was broadcast by CBS in 1956); rock videos (which, beginning with "Rock Around The Clock," developed into a series of internationally distributed rock and roll films starring Freed); and national television (his weekly rock and roll show on ABC-TV predated *American Bandstand*).

During his ascent, the often brash and headstrong self-proclaimed King of Rock and Roll made enemies as well as fans. His detractors included much of the old guard of the pop music business, who held a stranglehold on it until Freed and rock and roll overturned the apple cart. There were also those who resented Freed's championing of black recording artists to America's white youth and looked forward to the day he would receive his comeuppance. That time arrived in 1959, when the controversial deejay became the scapegoat of a politically motivated broadcasting payola scandal. Today, the word payola conjures images of shady disc jockeys holding innocent record companies hostage. But the situation in the 1950s was something quite different. Payola money or other inducements given in exchange for radio airplay was not only legal

then, it was an accepted business practice. Such payments were reported as legitimate expenses by record companies and distributors.

The payola scandal was an outgrowth of another sensational media-related story, the rigging of television quiz shows. When it was determined that no laws had been broken in the quiz-show deception, both the New York District Attorney's office, which investigated the case, and the House of Representatives, which held hearings to determine if new federal legislation was required, sought to save face and still draw a measure of sensational blood.

Prodded by the music industry's old guard, which had suffered financially from rock and roll's inroads, the New York DA and the House of Representatives switched their focus to payola.

The DA's office unearthed an arcane law pertaining to commercial bribery and successfully applied it to the practice of disc jockey payola. Although the givers and takers of payola were equally guilty under the law, one party needed to testify against the other in court. Realizing that the prosecution of popular deejays like Freed would result in more sensational headlines, the record companies were given immunity and testified against the disc jockeys. Freed and several others were convicted, and he wound up losing his radio and television programs.

Banished from New York, Freed found sol-

ace in California, where he briefly returned to radio. But he realized things would never again be the same. As the rock and roll world began to pass him by, Freed grew increasingly despondent. Destitute and forgotten, Freed died in January 1965, in Palm Springs. Early in his career, the chain-smoking, hard-drinking radio personality had barely survived a serious automobile crash. At the time, his doctors told him that if he gave up his vices he could possibly live another 10 years. Having characteristically disregarded the advice of his doctors, Freed still managed to come within three months of his predicted life span.

Freed's name remained out of the limelight for two decades. Then in 1986, he became one of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's initial inductees in the non-performer category. Generations of music lovers thus began to recognize and appreciate the disc jockey's groundbreaking achievements. Five years later, Freed's biography, *Big Beat Heat: Alan Freed and the Early Years of Rock and Roll*, was published. In 1999, his life was the subject of a network television film, *Mr. Rock And Roll*.



"Pandemonium from 8 PM to 2 AM!"

Alan Freed did more than any one person to lay the groundwork for today's multibillion-dollar rock industry. His Moondog Coronation Ball is widely considered to be the landmark event that caused the recording industry to first view black popular music as something more than marginal entertainment. Because of that event, and countless similar promotions, Freed was largely responsible for bringing black recording artists into the mainstream of American popular music. ✧

Alan Freed Returns to Cleveland

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum is the new resting place of the late, legendary DJ Alan Freed. Freed's cremated remains have been transferred to the Museum. A private ceremony was held on March 21—fifty years to the day after Freed hosted the Moondog Coronation Ball at the Cleveland Arena.

"The entire Freed family is in agreement that Dad would have wanted the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum to be his final resting place," said Lance Freed, Alan's son. "After all, he loved to be around people, and he was a showman and a public figure. Cleveland was the city where it all began, and the Museum is the place in the world that best commemorates the art form to which he dedicated his life."

"No one was more important to the history of rock and roll music in Cleveland than Alan Freed," said Terry Stewart, president and CEO of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. "It is a tremendous honor to have him come to us here at the Museum. When the Freed family expressed this wish, we were both thrilled and humbled. We hope that visitors will be as moved as we are."

curator's column

THE ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM IS currently celebrating the 50th anniversary of rock and roll with a series of events and exhibits. The celebration is pegged to a landmark event that took place in Cleveland on March 21, 1952, when deejay Alan Freed presented the Moondog Coronation Ball at the Cleveland Arena (see related article on page 29). That show is now widely considered to have been the first rock and roll concert, and given Freed's role in the birth of rock and roll, it's a fitting anniversary to commemorate.

At the same time, Freed's show was really a rhythm & blues revue. The featured artists were people like Paul Williams, the Dominoes, Tiny Grimes and Varetta Dillard – not first-generation rock and rollers like Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley or Buddy Holly. It would be a few more years before those artists would make their mark on the world.

As another legendary Cleveland deejay, Bill Randle, has pointed out, the significance of Freed's concert was that it was the "beginning of the acceptance of black popular music as a force in radio. It was the first big show of its kind where the industry saw it as big business." In other words, Freed's Coronation Ball was a turning point: for the first time, the music that formed the roots of rock and roll was being taken seriously by the establishment.

At the time of Freed's concert, popular music was, virtually by definition, white music, made by, and performed for, older, mainstream white Americans. The music that influenced rock and roll, on the other hand, did not appeal to the mainstream. Some of these styles – like rhythm & blues – were more urban, while others – like country and bluegrass – were more rural. Some, like gospel, sprang from the church, while others, like the blues, espoused views abhorrent to the church. Many of them had their origins in the American South. But they all had one thing in common: they spoke to the more disenfranchised elements of American society – to African-Americans and poor whites. And, indeed, the vast majority of the fans who turned out for Freed's first concert were African-American.

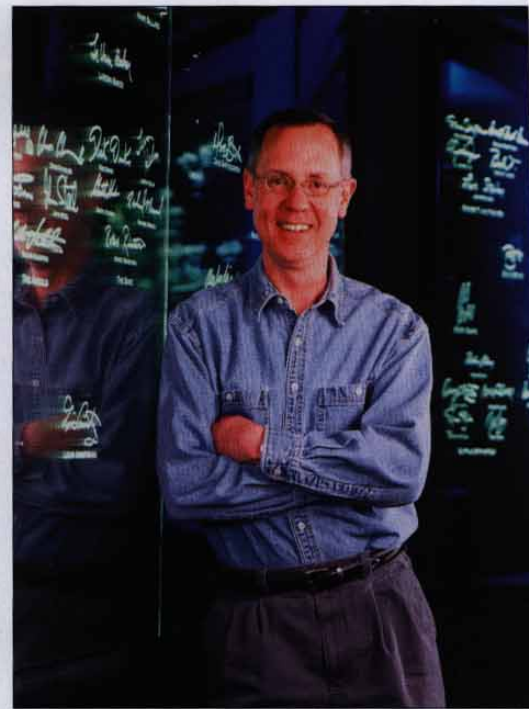
The pioneering rock and roll artists of the

Fifties – Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis and others – were attracted to these styles of music because they found in them an honesty, a passion and a sense of reality that was, for the most part, lacking in pop music. Each of these artists borrowed elements from these uniquely American forms of music and created their own styles. Eventually, the music they made came to be known as rock and roll.

To pay tribute to rock's roots, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame includes a category of inductees called Early Influences. While these artists were not rock and rollers themselves, the music we celebrate would have been inconceivable without them. And without Alan Freed's efforts, it's quite likely that these artists would never have been accepted into the mainstream of American music.

The same can be said for two of our other inductees, Sam Phillips and Ahmet Ertegun. Both of these men grew up with a love of black music, and both were astonished that this music was being relegated to the fringes of American society. Phillips and Ertegun had two other traits in common: a stubborn belief in their own taste and an entrepreneurial spirit that led them to believe that if they began recording and distributing records by these blues and rhythm & blues artists, the rest of America would soon share their love of the music.

As it turned out, they were right. Both Sun Records (Phillips' label) and Atlantic Records



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(Ertegun's) played major roles in the development of rock and roll, and each label was home to numerous artists who have since been inducted into the Hall of Fame.

Both Sun and Atlantic are the subjects of exhibits in the Hall of Fame's galleries. And this past February, the Hall of Fame saluted Atlantic's achievements as part of our Black History Month celebration.

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