

Sound of history

Collector's tape of deejay Freed to be part of rock hall archives

By MICHELE M. MELENDEZ

PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

CARLISLE TOWNSHIP — Henry Niedzwiecki gave away his 15 minutes of fame.

He owned the only known copy — a 15-minute audio tape — of Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed's radio show after the 1952 Moondog Coronation Ball, hailed as the first rock concert.

Now, the tape belongs to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. Soon, it will be available to everyone.

"If the hall had gone to any place other than Cleveland, I wouldn't have given it away," said Niedzwiecki, a native Clevelander who lives in Carlisle Township. "Cleveland has such a strong rock 'n' roll heritage, and Clevelanders should be able to learn about it."

Although Niedzwiecki's tape will not be part of the museum exhibit that includes Freed, it will someday be part of the hall's public archives.

"We decided to move full steam ahead on the art exhibits," said Jim Henke, chief curator of the rock hall. "The archives are part of Phase B, which will begin after the exhibits are done."

Henke said most of the items chosen for the exhibits have come from the artists and serious rock memorabilia collectors, not individuals.

"In general, people don't collect this kind of stuff," Henke said.

It is fitting that the Freed recording will go into the hall's archives. Niedzwiecki does not consider himself a collector; he says he is an archivist.

"I collect information and write for my own archives, but I'm not stingy," he said with a smile. "I'll share what I have with anyone who's interested."

Niedzwiecki, a millwright at Ford Motor Co.'s Ohio Assembly Plant in Avon Lake, used to write a music column for the United Auto Workers Local 2000's newsletter. A wall of shelves in his living room is packed with 10,000 record singles and albums — some of them signed to him by artists such as Chuck Berry, Fats Domino and Bill Haley.

The 54-year-old has been to all of the Moondog Coronation Balls since the ill-fated first one. Through his friendship with Cleveland disc jockey Norm N. Nite, he has gone backstage during the shows and taken photographs of the performers.

Niedzwiecki started collecting during the days of Alan Freed.

In 1952, Freed, who had a nightly show on WJW Radio called the Moondog Show, organized the Moondog Coronation Ball at the old Cleveland Arena on Euclid Ave. Paul Williams, The Dominoes and Varetta Dillard were to perform, but Cleveland police stopped the sold-out show during Williams' set when thousands of fans tried to fight their way into the arena.

"At the beginning of the [ra-



ANDREW CIFRANIC / PLAIN DEALER PHOTOGRAPHER

Henry Niedzwiecki at home in Carlisle Township, where 10,000 record singles and albums — some signed by artists such as Chuck Berry, Fats Domino and Bill Haley — fill his living room walls.

dio] show after the riot, he explained his side of what happened," Niedzwiecki said while leafing through a Life magazine photo spread of the mob. "He was rather despondent because the Press and The Plain Dealer had called him some rather interesting names."

Freed, who was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986, said during that broadcast that for the first hour of the ball, 9,700 people were enjoying the music show when 7,000 others outside pushed their way into the arena. That is the speech Niedzwiecki got on tape.

"In 1965, when Alan Freed

died, I thought, 'This guy's not going to be recording anything anymore. Someone's got to keep his memory in Cleveland,'" he said. "I took out an ad in The Plain Dealer asking for audio tapes of Alan Freed."

Niedzwiecki said Freed's former engineer responded and offered a free copy of the broadcast speech after the 1952 ball.

He said that a week after the engineer made him a copy on tape, the engineer called to tell him the original recording had broken in half. Niedzwiecki now had the only copy. After making a copy for himself, he donated the original to the rock hall.