

Free

SCENE™

ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

The Moondog Coronation Ball
The 40th Anniversary
Of A Landmark
Rock & Roll Show

Deter
Frampton
Britny Fox
Also: Film, &
Club Hopping

C'mon
TIME OUT!
ALAN FREED'S
THE MOONDOG HOUSE
BLUES
JAZZ
STATION WJW
RECORD RENDEZVOUS
123 PROSPECT AVE.

**MOONDOG
CORONATION BALL
CLEVELAND ARENA**
FRIDAY NITE, MAR. 21
10 P.M. to 2 A.M.
PAUL WILLIAMS ★ TINY GRIMES
THE DOMINOES ★ DANNY COBB
VAJETTA DILLARD • MIET STREIBL
THE MOONDOG RADIO SHOW
WITH ALAN FREED IN PERSON
Adv. Sale Tickets \$1.50 Adm. at Door \$1.75

Moondog Coronation Ball:

the birth of rock and roll



by Joyce Halasa

Happy birthday rock and roll!

The world of popular music will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the birth of rock and roll this Saturday, March 21.

The "Moondog Coronation Ball," sponsored by WJW-AM disc jockey Alan Freed at the Arena in 1952, propelled his career and the music he was playing — rhythm and blues — into the national spotlight.

Norm N. Nite, author, historian, WMJI-FM disc jockey and Cleveland's most vocal cheerleader, speaks proudly of the event. "In the circle of rock historians, it has been universally accepted that the beginnings of rock and roll was on that date. The concert was the one that set the tone that erupted the whole thing called 'rock and roll.'"

This concert's story began around 1947 in the promotional

mind of Record Rendezvous store owner Leo Mintz. He saw the attraction that his white teenage customers had for rhythm and blues, then called "race music." Because of that era's racial differences, Mintz felt that to increase sales he needed to homogenize the music, removing any of its racial connotation.

Mintz saw the gyrations of his customers when they heard this music at his store. So, borrowing from an old blues lyric meaning fornication, he dubbed this music "rock and roll." Mintz then set out to find a disc jockey that would play this music, since most disc jockeys only played white music.

Meanwhile, at WAKR-AM in Akron, afternoon disc jockey Alan Freed was a young brash entertainer always looking to get ahead. As destiny would have it, the ambitious Freed met the promotionally-minded Mintz...and the fireworks began.

Freed used the term "rock and roll" at WAKR occasionally, when, as a novelty, he would play a rhythm and blues record.

After Freed left WAKR, and during a year's unemployment, his friendship with Mintz deepened. A big-hearted Mintz helped support Freed's family until he got a job as an afternoon movie host at WXEL-TV in Cleveland in April of 1950.

In July of 1951, Freed returned to radio. With Record Rendezvous as the major sponsor, Freed's WJW radio program, the "Moondog House Rock And Roll Party," was broadcast six times per week from 11:15 p.m. to 12:30 a.m.

Mintz supplied Freed with the records he played, and would often sit next to Freed in the studio and hand him record selections. Two such records were an odd tune by Louis Harden called "Moondog" and "Blues For The Red Boy" by Todd Rhodes. Freed used these songs to open his show each night, and was soon calling his listeners "moondoggers." He called himself "the king of the moondoggers."

"In 1952," Nite says, "rock and roll wasn't the name of music, it was the name of Alan Freed's radio show. It was a rock and roll show that played rhythm and blues. It is important to understand that upfront.

"A lot of disc jockeys in Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles and all over the country were playing rhythm and blues music, as was Freed. But none of them had the foresight to call it rock and roll as Freed did."

Freed's radio show was an instant success among black teenagers. Despite the large amount of blacks that migrated here to work in the factories during World War II, there was no other program playing rhythm and blues exclusively. Freed's show also started "crossing over" to a growing number of white teens.

After about six months at WJW, Freed began promoting concerts featuring artists that he played on his radio show. This was not a novel idea. Large-hall concerts featuring rhythm and blues existed all over the country.

According to the *Call & Post* (3/29/52), Freed promoted two shows in early 1952 in Akron and Canton with Akron dance promoter Booker Brooks. Freed then promoted a show with dance promoter Lew Platt.

A *Call & Post* cutline under a picture of Freed on stage at the latter show reads: *More than 2,580 dancers thronged the Meyers Lake Ballroom near Canton, Ohio, recently when Alan Freed exceeded a Moondog show featuring Tammy Grimes there. These "Moondoggers" braved a bad snowstorm on a cold night to drive from all over Northern Ohio and left a damage estimate in their wake which may mean that Negroes would have a long wait before they were allowed back into the ballroom which is considered one of the most beautiful and best conditioned in America, according to Lewis Platt, the Akron Promoter.*

"The concerts Freed did was a prelude to the 'Moondog Ball,'" explains Nite. "Like doing a Broadway show, they played it out of town first. But, because Cleveland was a major market and the Arena a major venue, they built it up to be a major event."

Along with his partners, Lew Platt and Leo Mintz, Freed set a date for the concert featuring Paul Williams and the Hucklebuckers, Tammy Grimes and the Rockin' Highlanders, the Dominoes, Danny Cobb and Varetta Dilliard at the Cleveland Arena for March 21, 1952. Tickets were \$1.50 and \$1.75 at the door.

Advertised on the posters as "the most terrible ball of them all," the event was called the "Moondog Coronation Ball" because Freed intended to crown himself "king of the moon-doggers."

The advance sale of the tickets was healthy, but in no way was Freed or the Arena staff prepared for the large crowd of people who showed up the night of the concert. After letting in the capacity of the hall, there were still thousands of people outside looking to get into the dance.

At first, there was no sign of trouble. It was a festive crowd, all dressed in their finest Sunday clothes. To most people's surprise, about five to ten percent of the audience was white. It was Freed's first concrete indication that rhythm and blues was "crossing over."

Freed was never crowned king that night. When the music started, the huge crowd outside broke down the Arena doors to get in. Fighting erupted throughout the audience and the concert stopped after one song.

The next morning the local newspapers wildly speculated how many tickets were really sold and how many people ended up inside the hall. It has since been opined that instead of the show being oversold, it might have been double ticketed or counterfeited.

The noise the local newspapers made was carried across the news wires and it became a concert that was heard around the world. It was covered in *The New York Times* and *The London Times*.

"It turned out to be a good thing for Alan Freed," Nite explains, "since he gained in popularity after all that. But after all the commotion after the concert, I think that Freed and this city wanted to forget about it."

Freed worked at WJW until August 15, 1954, and he continued to promote shows without incident. He then moved to WINS-AM in New York City. Freed continued to promote shows on the East Coast until the late '50s. Unfortunately, the violence and sensational headlines followed him there. Freed's career and reputation were irreparably destroyed by the spotlight on him during the FTC's payola trials of 1959-60. He died January 20, 1965, rejected by the music industry. He was only 42 years old.

Freed was a forgotten figure until 1971 when an English writer — Charlie Gillett — published his book *THE SOUND OF THE CITY — THE RISE OF ROCK AND ROLL*. With a per-

spective of 15 years, Gillett was one of the first historians to credit Freed's role in starting rock and roll. Suddenly, respect for Alan Freed started to grow again.

Cleveland Press writer Fred McGunagle reviewed Gillett's book in the *Showtime* magazine (2/8/71). McGunagle's article revealed to a new generation of Cleveland rockers the importance of the "Moondog Coronation Ball."

McGunagle wrote: *To Clevelanders who remember him, Alan Freed was a raucous, fast-talking disc jockey whose principal claim to fame was causing a near riot when he oversold the Arena for a rock and roll dance.*

According to Gillett, Freed was the man who helped launch a revolution in popular music and the "Moondog Coronation Ball" of 1952 was the key event.

The event — reported around the country — drew the attention of the music moguls to the impact of this new — to them — kind of music. Freed's show was soon syndicated and in 1954 he went to WINS, New York, with a lucrative contract.

Nowhere in Gillett's book nor in McGunagle's article do they call the "Moondog Coronation Ball" the "first" rock concert. But, the headline reads, "March 21, 1952 — at the Cleveland Arena: The first rock festival."

"I learned it was the first rock concert from the *Press* article in 1971," Nite recalls. "And ever since then it has been an important event for me. Even then, I was researching my first *ROCK ON* book, so I tried to learn as much as I could about it from Leo Mintz. I don't remember the concert being called the 'first' before that article."

McGunagle told SCENE that he is not sure if he heard the "first" phrase before he wrote the article 21 years ago. He did not write the headline but assumes that it was written by *Showtime* editor Jim Frankel. It is possible that Frankel, trying to write a clever headline, inadvertently dubbed the concert as the "first."

In the mid '80s, cheerleader Nite used Freed's Cleveland activities and the "Moondog Coronation Ball" to rally public and civic support to bring the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum here.

The festivities to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the birth of rock and roll will be this Saturday, March 21, at the "Moondog Coronation Ball '92" at Public Hall. Led by the appearance of the leader of the only band that actually performed the night of the original concert, Paul Williams (from the Hucklebuckers), the show features Little Anthony & the Original Imperials, Ronnie Spector, Clarence "Frogman" Henry, Jerry Butler, the Diamonds, the Drifters, the Tokens, Len Barry and Stormy Weather & the Royaltones.

Happy 40th birthday rock and roll!