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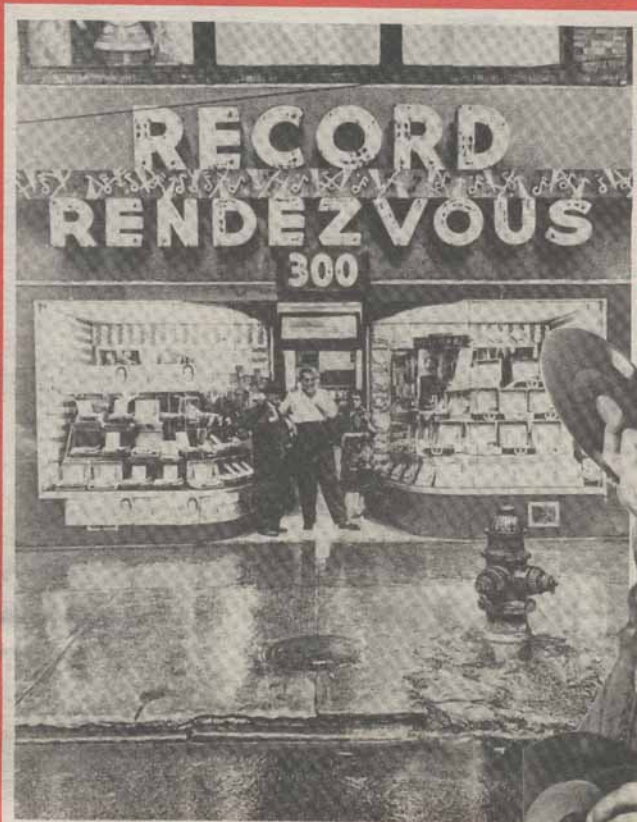
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Mintz and Moondog 'made' Rock'n Roll

By NORMAN WAIN



Coiner of the phrase 'rock 'n roll,' the late Leo Mintz (center) is shown at his Record Rendezvous. Mintz encouraged disc jockey Alan Freed (inset) to play what was then 'race' music.

Is there a Jewish connection to the proposed Cleveland "Rock and Roll Hall of Fame" you've been hearing so much about recently? You bet there is!

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'Moondog' and Mintz were magic duo catapulting 'Rock and Roll' to fame

By NORMAN WAIN

Is there a Jewish connection to the proposed Cleveland "Rock and Roll Hall of Fame" you've been hearing so much about recently? You bet there is!

The Jewish connection is provided by none other than the late Leo Mintz, a colorful downtown character who owned the famed Record Rendezvous store on lower Prospect Avenue during the 50's, 60's and 70's.

Was famed disc jockey Alan Freed Jewish? That's a

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question we'll leave to the historians. As far as Leo goes, however, the record is clear.

Black music segregated

As impossible as it seems, most American radio stations simply did not play music by popular black artists back in the late 40's and early 50's. To be sure, there were some exceptions. Names like Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Nat King Cole spring readily to mind. But they were the exceptions. And, you could count the "accredited" artists on the fingers of one hand.

If your favorite radio station was a black-format station like WJMO-AM, you could regularly hear music by artists such as Etta James, T-Bone Walker, or George "Mr. Blues" Jackson. But "general market" stations (a euphemism for "white") simply ignored those artists in favor of the current pop favorites.

When Alan Freed was hired by radio station WJW (850 kc AM) to be a disc jockey on the late night shift, his instructions were simply to play the current pop favorites. This he dutifully did for a number of years without attracting any inordinate fame or fortune in the process. As a matter of fact, his program was so undistinguished that the radio station could not charge top money for commercial announcements when Freed was broadcasting.

The Mintz factor

Enter Leo Mintz. Perhaps attracted by the late night schedule (Freed's show began at 11:15 p.m. and ran until 1 a.m.) or the inexpensive advertising costs, Mintz bought a few spot announcements to advertise his Record Rendezvous.

At about this same time, things were rapidly changing at the "Vous," as it was popularly known.

Leo noticed that more and more of his clientele were black. So naturally, being a good merchandiser, he began stocking more and more titles by the favored black recording artists, which his customers wanted.

Playing 'race' music

In those days, disc jockeys had wide latitude over the choice of records they could play on the air. Since The Record Rendezvous was a major sponsor of his program, it was natural that Mintz and Freed became quite friendly. Leo even visited the WJW studios while Freed was on the air.



Plugging music at his well-known Prospect Avenue record shop, was the late Leo Mintz.

Eventually, Leo convinced Freed to begin playing some of the music his customers were buying. And so it came to pass that Alan Freed, influenced by Leo Mintz, began playing what was then known as "race" music. It was a bold step. Alan Freed, a white disc jockey playing black music on a "general market" or "white" radio station!

The result was impressive.

Freed's ratings suddenly went through the roof. Other sponsors (most notably ErinBrew, a local beer) were attracted to the program which almost overnight became the most popular deejay show in Cleveland. Freed reacted quickly and changed the name of his program to the "Moondog Show."

Theatre of the Moondog

The Moondog Show was really a product of Alan Freed's concept of "Theatre of the Mind." The program opened at 11:15 each evening with the strange rustling sounds of a home-made instrument used by a famous New York City street beggar known as "Moondog." Then, as the theme began, the eerie sound of a wailing wolf-hound could be heard over the music.

Freed would begin his show with a few words like "Down boy . . . later . . . relax" while the "Moondog" sniffed and growled.

Throughout the program Freed used the technique then popularized by black disc jockeys of "talking" to the records. That is, he would urge the singers on by talking

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while the records played. This heightened the excitement of his show and his audience loved it.

Attracting white listeners

Audience surveys and feed-back from Leo Mintz indicated that Freed's program was not only popular among blacks, but he also was attracting new white listeners to his exciting show.

Both because he genuinely liked Freed and because his business interests were being served, Mintz continued to visit the WJW studios while Freed was on the air. He became a very important part of the show because Freed relied on him for music "research." That is Leo would tell Alan, based on store sales, which records to play, and which ones to drop.

Call it rock 'n roll

One night while Freed was excitedly doing his act and urging a singer on to greater efforts in a rendition of "Roll With Me, Henry" he turned to Mintz and said, "Leo, this music is so exciting, we've got to call it something." Leo said, "Allen, you are rolling tonight . . . you're rocking and rolling . . . call it "Rock and Roll."

The rest of the story is well known pop-culture history: The Moondog Coronation Ball at the Old Arena, on Euclid Avenue; the national attention; Freed going to New York; and above all, the fusion of black and white (and later southern country) musical streams into a new configuration called "Rock and Roll."

Will the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame be located here in Cleveland? Perhaps. But don't count on it. The record companies which are all set to foot the bill want to see a

return on the "investment." Therefore, the likelihood is that those companies will locate in a city which already attracts large numbers of tourists.

Recently, this writer contacted Ahmet Ertegun, president of Atlantic Records and a prime mover for the Hall of Fame, and reminded him of the Freed-Mintz Cleveland connection. Ertegun, in a friendly letter of reply was thankful for the reminder, but he remained non-committal.

Surely, Cleveland deserves to be the home of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. If it ever happens, I hope some small nook or cranny will be devoted to the memory of the man who named the music: Leo Mintz.

Norman Wain, the president of the Cleveland Jewish News, was a disc jockey in Cleveland from 1954 to 1960.