ROCK 'N' ROLL

So how many rock 'n' roll records do Clevelanders buy?

By David Sigworth
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Now hold on one second. No one seems to be able to prove the long-ballyhooed claim that Cleveland has the highest rock record sales per capita in the country.

The claim apparently dates back to the 1960s and is being used as one more reason why the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame should be in Cleveland. Indeed, the city is a top rock market. But some people in the music industry say the record-sales claim probably cannot be substantiated.

Tanya Blackwood, a public relations assistant for the Recording Industry Association of America in New York City, said the country's north-central region accounts for 24 percent of all money annually spent on rock music. However, the region extends from Ohio to Nebraska and Minnesota to Missouri.

The association does not have figures for individual markets, she said.

Nor does Lou Garrett, director of music purchasing for Camelot Enterprises of Canton. The company, the nation's second-largest music retailer, supplies albums to 178 Camelot Music stores, including 11 in Northeast Ohio.

"We've never had a need to break it down," Garrett said. "But it's a good market, I can tell you that."

All right, so maybe it is an overblown claim. But everyone knows it is true that Greater Cleveland rock fans snap up albums and concert tickets faster than Little

Richard said a-wop-bop-a-loo-bop, a-wop-bam-boom. Why?

"The main reason people like to say is there's not a lot else to do in Cleveland. But I don't know if I buy that," said Carl Monday, a WJW-TV 8 reporter and the owner of 4,000 45 rpm singles. "It's a working-class town and a lot of rock music is about the work ethic, romance. That whole thing is fostered here in Cleveland more than any other place."

But the lyrics are only part of it, said Steve Petryszyn, who holds a semiannual record convention in Cleveland. He and Monday last year released and sold 2,000 copies of "The Pride of Cleveland Past," an album featuring songs by Cleveland artists of the '60s. Both men grew up on the "Cleveland sound."

Petryszyn said Clevelanders have been hooked on rock 'n' roll since Leo Mintz of Record Rendezvous and WJW disc jockey Alan Freed introduced it well ahead of the rest of the country. Teen-agers listened to Freed's radio shows, watched Don Webster's "Upbeat" on television and danced to local bands every weekend, he said.

"It was just a steady diet," said Petryszyn, who owns 8,000 albums. "We've gone through almost three generations of kids, from the '50s on up, who discovered it and grew up on it."

Steve Popovich, who started Cleveland International record company in 1976, said competition by Cleveland radio stations for new releases was much

greater in the '60s than today. Listeners were caught up by the touting.

"That was great for retail record stores because (radio) presented the music in an exciting way," said Popovich, who left Cleveland two months ago to become senior vice president at Mercury-Smash Records in Nashville. He owns about 2,500 albums.

As Cleveland's appetite for rock 'n' roll grew, it became self-perpetuating.

"What I hear, more than anything, is that Cleveland is a break-out market," said Jim Fox of Concord Township, drummer for the James Gang, a nationally popular band of the 1970s. The James Gang originated in Kent, so its initial success in Northeast Ohio grew from frequent local gigs, not from some grand market test.

Fox said record company executives know Cleveland listeners' reputation for picking out the up-and-coming performers. Among those finding early success in Cleveland were Elvis Presley, Todd Rundgren, Alice Cooper, David Bowie, Bruce Springsteen, The Police and Hall and Oates.

So initial releases of albums are sent to Cleveland radio stations, who always have been willing to offer their avid listeners a selection of new music, he said.

"Radio stations in Cleveland are somewhat eager to put new music out to see how it does," Fox said. "There aren't many cities like that."