

THE PLAIN DEALER

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An ode to Alan Freed, who missed all the hoopla

By **JOE FROLIK**

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Rick Sklar, once the guru of Top-40 radio and now a broadcasting consultant, maintains he is not the emotional sort. Especially on business trips.

But Sklar spent the past three days in Cleveland, advising executives of client station WRQC—FM on programming, promotion and everything else under the radio sun. And, amid the hullabaloo surrounding yesterday's 34th anniversary of the Moon Dog Coronation Ball, he often found his mind wandering to his old friend, Alan Freed, the man who staged the concert, coined the phrase "rock 'n' roll" and helped shape broadcasting history.

"To be here at this point in time is absolutely an emotional experience," said Sklar, a former vice president of ABC Radio. "It's very rare I'll feel something inside that will actually give me gooseflesh. But this, the memories of working with Alan. My God, a third of a century has gone by. It seems like yesterday."

Actually, it was 1954. Sklar was an assistant producer at WINS in New York City, just a few months removed from his first radio job as jack-of-all-trades at a tiny Long Island station. WINS had been sold by Crosley Broadcasting to a Seattle man named J. Elroy McCaw. Crosley had been so sure radio was dying, it had parted with the 50,000-watt station for a mere \$450,000.

McCaw was a cost-cutting fanatic. He put in 60-watt light bulbs. He ordered station logs typed single-space. He fired the studio orchestra.

But McCaw also knew that if WINS was to make money, it had to have ratings. To get ratings, it had to offer something different. So he was willing to pay the then-astronomical sum of \$75,000 to hire a guy his program director had told him about; a guy who was *really* different. A guy who was cleaning up out in Cleveland. Alan Freed was about to become a star or a bust.

Like everyone who read the trades, Sklar had heard of Freed. He knew all about the enormous ratings on WJW (now WRMR-AM) and the sellout concerts. He even had heard tapes of some Freed shows on a small New Jersey station. It was interesting and it surely was different, but would it work in New York?

"Immediately, the phones rang off the wall," Sklar recalled. "The kids loved it and the parents hated it, but the kids controlled the dial ... (so) Alan got all the ratings. His show went up to No. 1. Imitators sprang up everywhere in the country."

Rock 'n' roll radio was born. And, Sklar thinks, radio was saved.

In the early 1950s, Crosley Broadcasting was not alone in writing off radio. The conventional wisdom was that if people could have radio with pictures — television — why would they still want old-fashioned radio? As



PD/WILLIAM A. ASHBOLT

Rick Sklar
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cost-conscious broadcasters like McCaw laid off their orchestras and hired disc jockeys to play records, the naysayers argued that that wouldn't work, either. After all, why tune in to listen to records when you can play them yourself?

What Freed did was play records unlike most people — at least most white people — had ever heard. And

he played lots of them, as many as 100 titles a week. Even as the idea of a Top-40 format evolved, Freed demanded and received freedom to do things his way.

His way was flamboyant, establishing a model for deejays everywhere. As a programmer, Sklar himself would use it to make New York's WABC-AM the most listened-to radio

station in the country from 1964 to 1977.

"He was a nervous guy. He had a tremendous amount of energy. He couldn't sit still," said Sklar. He remembers Freed sitting in the studio banging on the Yellow Pages through-out his broadcast.

"He was someone who had a tremendous sense of showmanship," Sklar continued. "He felt there was a momentum he had to keep going all the time. He did the concerts. He went out to clubs all night after his show. I don't think he could relax. He felt he was on to something good. The masses maybe didn't understand, but the kids did."

Sklar said the pressure of riding that wave eventually did in Freed.

"He felt besieged. The police would shut down his concerts. There were protests that the music was corrupting morals. He was attacked in the press. He was attacked everywhere."

By the late 1950s, Freed was so busy promoting concerts, he often missed his air shifts. When a near-riot erupted at a show in Boston, McCaw, fearful of losing his broadcast license, fired Freed. Payola revelations about Freed soon followed, and he was unable to find work. The man who taught radio to rock died penniless in 1965.

Freed was gone from the airwaves before his pioneering work really bore fruit. Even after Freed led WINS to No. 1 in the ratings, Sklar said, its sales staff had trouble wooing adver-

tisers; that problem would persist for rock stations into the late 1970s.

But by 1961, the future of radio itself was no longer in question. That year, J. Elroy McCaw sold WINS for \$10 million.

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In local radio news:

WCPN-FM/90.3 reporter Zina Vishnevsky leaves for Israel today. She will be there 10 days, filing reports for the station's "Afternoon Edition" program and making contacts for phone coverage of the upcoming trial of John Demjanjuk of Seven Hills, accused of being a guard at a Nazi death camp. She also plans to work on two documentaries: one on Cleveland-area Jews who have immigrated to Israel and another on Ukrainians who have settled there. WCPN news director Vivian Goodman said the trip was being underwritten by the local Jewish and Ukrainian communities.

The departure of Betty Korvan for Rapid City, S.D., left vacancies at both WMMS-FM/100.7 and WHK-AM/1420. The weekday afternoon shift at WHK will be filled by former part-timer Barb Lincoln. Bill Freeman will take over Korvan's Saturday night duties at WMMS, and his weekend overnight slots will go to Scott Hughes, the former morning team member. Speaking of the morning team, Capt. Kenny Clean, the janitor-turned-personality (of sorts), has been AWOL for several weeks, and WMMS operations manager John Gorman said if he turned up, he would not be welcomed back.