

# Brother reflects on Freed's role in rock 'n' roll

By KEVIN HARTER  
PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

Forty-plus years ago, Alan Freed played black music to white kids, helped define and develop the role of a radio disc jockey and coined the term he will forever be famous for — rock 'n' roll.

Alan Freed was to radio and emerging rock 'n' roll what Babe Ruth was to baseball. He may not have built the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, but he certainly laid part of its foundation.

The Salem, Ohio, native was flamboyant, charismatic, and a rebel. Broadcasting live from WJW in the early 1950s, he arguably was the voice of a radical new musical movement sweeping the nation.

Broadcasting predominantly black rhythm and blues over an open microphone, Alan Freed pounded out the beat with his fist on a phone book.

"Of all the things Alan did, the most important was lending a term to what we call R&B music and taking it to a wider audience," David Freed, 71, of Painesville Township, said.

"The town was loaded with disc jockeys, but Alan was the only one who picked up on the music," he said. "He loved the music."

The term was a sum of its parts, David Freed said, adding his older brother was into all music,

but his focus was jazz and blues.

The term Alan Freed coined, his brother said, has its roots in jazz and one of its practitioners, Jelly Roll Morton.

"There has always been some question concerning the coining of the term," David Freed said. "But it was Alan. He often said [on the radio] we are really rockin' 'n' rollin' tonight."

It was also a phrase David Freed recalls his brother uttering a few times during his Akron radio days, but like the music he broadcast, it didn't catch until he hit Cleveland.

"It was his term," David Freed said. "I wish now we had copyrighted it."

As the music and the man gained momentum, Freed capitalized on it by promoting the "Moondog Coronation Ball" at the old Arena on Euclid Ave. in 1952. Throngs overran the gig, and police shut it down. There were allegations that promoters oversold the concert, and screaming headlines followed.

"Moon Dog Ball Is Halted as 6,000 Crash Gate" read The Plain Dealer's front page.

That ill-fated concert, and the headlines it generated, were Alan Freed's ticket to New York, David Freed believes.

"It was a madhouse. College and high school kids crashed the doors at the arena," he recalled.

"Wherever Alan went, he was always just one step ahead of the police for causing a disturbance."

Lured away from Cleveland for the then unheard of salary of \$75,000, the "Alan Freed Rock 'n' Roll Show" began broadcasting on WINS Sept. 8, 1954.

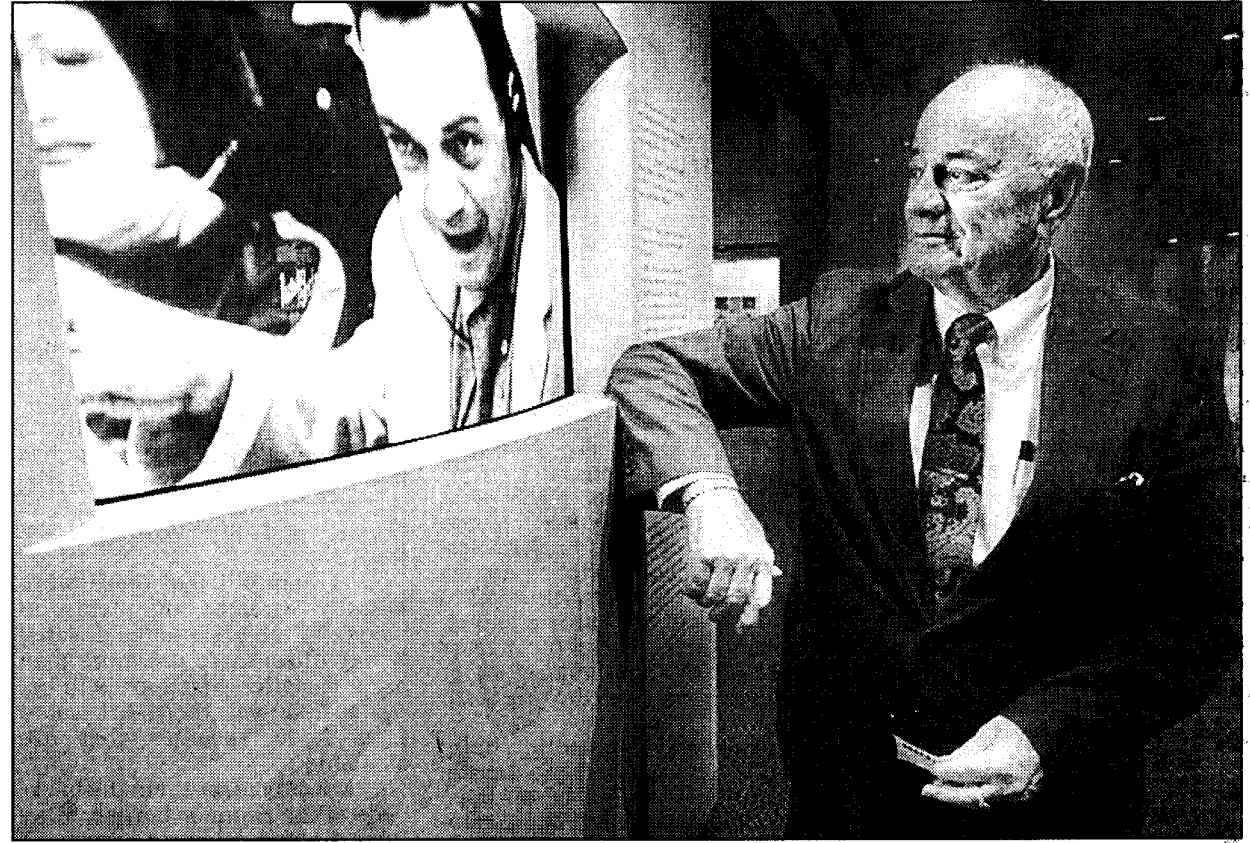
As his brother became rich and more famous, David Freed, who was a partner with his brother in a record distributorship, stayed behind. His taste for the music business soured, so he enrolled at Case Western Reserve University Law School and settled into a secure life.

It was different for Alan Freed. Five years after leaving for New York, scandal cast a long, dark shadow across Alan Freed's career and life.

In 1959, at the height of the payola scandal sweeping the radio and TV industry, Alan Freed signed an affidavit admitting he received gifts or payments from record companies and artists.

Getting paid to play records — known as payola — was a widespread industry practice at the time, David Freed said, adding his brother never did that, but he did accept money or presents from record companies.

His name tarnished, Alan Freed was blackballed from the industry he loved. Emotionally and economically damaged, he moved to Palm Springs, Calif.,



CHUCK CROW / PLAIN DEALER PHOTOGRAPHER

David Freed looks at the video display of his late brother, disc jockey Alan Freed, at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. David Freed donated some memorabilia to the exhibit.

with his third wife in 1960.

With limited success, he worked on a self-syndicated show, but his life and philosophy were beginning to mirror some of rock's doomed early stars.

"He always said he wanted to live fast, die young and leave a good looking corpse," David

Freed said.

Alan Freed died at 41 in a Palm Springs hospital on the day President Lyndon B. Johnson was inaugurated in 1965. According to his autopsy, he died from massive internal bleeding brought on by advanced cirrhosis. After being cremated, his ashes were taken to

Manhattan where he was interred.

While accepting the medical report, David Freed prefers to put a romantic spin and add that he died of complications of life.

"Alan Freed died of a broken heart," he said, "because they took his microphone away."