

LOS ANGELES

FREE
PRESS



HOT WAX: America's Rock Riot

By Michael Ventura

"One, two, three — ee!
Look at Mr. Leeeee.
Three, four, five — ii!
Look at him jive!"

— '50s rock hit

The first "political" argument I can remember having was in a Brooklyn junior-high during home room, in the spring of 1958: We were arguing over who was better, Dick Clark or Alan Freed?

There were those who watched *American Bandstand* and there were those who watched *The Big Beat*. They were different ways of life.

Bandstand came out of a brightly lit studio in Philadelphia, and the dancers were brightly lit white kids who conformed to the Dick Clark dress code: no blue jeans, no long hair, no short tight dresses, no dirty dancing, and the only blacks allowed were occasional performers. Clark played what Freed would call "vanilla music," though he couldn't help but play a good song every third tune or so — rock 'n' roll was like that then. [Continued on p. 22]

camera and the beat of the music create an odd tension, magnifying the weirdness. Freed can project even in a still. *Rock 'n' roll is here to stay, it will never die! It was meant to be that way, though I don't know why. Freed gets bigger and bigger, as though he's growing out of the music — a weird, fitting resurrection.*

"Give Me Five Dom-Doms and Two Doobie-Doobies"

Paramount is bragging about the filming of *American Hot Wax* — how director Mitrus finished it in 35 days, five days under schedule; how they've crammed the normal six months of post-production work — editing, sound, all of it — into just under two.

It's a silly brag. They took what could have been an excellent film about an important subject and turned it into a rushed, flawed work with some excellent moments and much great music.

In the tight filming schedule there wasn't time to work out the lines that didn't play. Poor Tim McIntire has to declaim lines like, "You can stop the show — you can stop me — but you're not gonna stop rock 'n' roll!"

Freed's show would turn us masturbating young boys into warriors from outer space.

The lesser players act like *Happy Days* kids who've been given permission to use the "f-word", as one girl puts it. There wasn't shouting-time to work out the subtleties and signals that are the texture of any teen world; much less to go back and express the texture peculiar to the late '50s.

Filming fast and furiously, the acting works best in the fast and furious scenes: the feel of backstage, the chaos of Freed's office, how business is done in the halls, in cars, on the streets — this comes across. So we see Alan Freed in some good moments, and in many overdone moments, but with no story. While the other characters are only caricatures, not real enough to engage our sympathies.

But:

American Hot Wax has the best 1950s music ever put on film. The recreations of

those hits — "Come Go With Me," "Mr. Lee," "Mr. Blue," "Hushabye," "Rock 'n' Roll Is Here To Stay," "Whispering Bells," "Maybe" and on and on — have all the conviction and energy of the original. There is no small feat. For anyone to whom this music once meant everything, seeing it put on film with such immediacy is a powerful experience... an experience well worth sitting through the flaws of Paramount's rushed production.

Because we forget. We forget that when Darryl and the Juniors sang "Rock 'n' Roll Is Here To Stay," nobody but us and Alan Freed and maybe the FBI believed it. Because it was our music then — the big studios and recording companies hadn't taken everything over yet. They thought rock 'n' roll was no class, that it was a passing fad. The great records came out on labels that were lucky to issue a half dozen discs before they folded. Recording techniques were as primitive and informal as they are in the great Jamaican film *The Harder They Come*. In fact *American Hot Wax*, at its very best, has a musical affinity to *The Harder They Came*.

When a producer in *American Hot Wax* tells the Platonets, "Give me five dom-doms and two doobie-doobies," he's speaking an exact technical language to

musicians who couldn't read music and wouldn't know G-clef from an E-flat. The dom-doms and doobie-doobies were there for a hard technical reason, a reason Alan Freed understood:

This was music meant to be danced to, sung by people too poor to buy musical instruments. For the western Eastern groups, city groups, skum groups — it would be another year before middle-class kids got into the act. In Tupelo, Mississippi, even white trash Elvis Presley could afford a guitar. In Lubbock, Texas, guitars were a tradition for Buddy Holly. But on the streets of the western Eastern groups and the kids of immigrants had nothing but their voices and their hands. "Mr. Lee," "Whispering Bells," "Come Go With Me," were from an era before the musical instrument business caught on and pitched its wares to the kids... an era where 40 kids would dance at a party to four kids singing and hand-clapping.

It passed very quickly. By 1960, rock 'n' roll was here to stay, it was a market, and soon the kids had more hardware than they could possibly use. There was no longer a need for "ooooo-waaaah doobie-doobie," so it became a nostalgic gimmick.

Somehow in *American Hot Wax* they've recreated the '50s sound at full power. It gives the film an emotional impact beyond what the script or the acting deserve. There they were singing "Maybe" and there it was in my eyes. I'm not very critical when I'm crying. A black guy sitting two seats away from me said, "Shit — that's the music, alright."

I said, "Yeah — long time." ●

Freed In L.A.



The events depicted in *American Hot Wax* marked the end of Alan Freed's career in his natural stomping ground, the big cities of the East. After a stint in Cleveland, his last important radio gig was here in L.A., at KDAY in 1960.

A man who remembers is Kim Fowley. Now Fowley has 54 gold records and 11 platinum to his credit; in those days he was a kid just out of his teens, hanging out at the radio station, keeping his eyes and ears open. Freed took young Fowley under

his wing and helped him learn the business, introducing him to key people with the line, "This is Kim Fowley, he's going to be good someday."

"He was like a father to me," Fowley told the Free Press. We asked him about the old days.

Kim Fowley: We're talking about Los Angeles in the very early '60s and not Hotel California. When Freed came to L.A., he shook the city up. He brought passion and energy to the radio dial. His

playlist threatened the then-reigning KFVB. Freed gave the minorities and the kids the same posture that Bruce Springsteen as a lyricist gives the characters in his songs.

I was in the Bagans of West L.A., an outdoor car club, and we used to cruise to Alan Freed's program. We used to throw eggs and show foolish at passing cars. We would only march when Freed played certain songs. We would only move when *High School Confidential* or *Great Balls of Fire* were aired. Freed's show would turn us masturbating young boys into warriors from outer space as we crashed parties we weren't invited to.

Free Press: What was his radio show like?

Kim Fowley: Well for instance, I remember when he or someone in his organization forced "Angel Baby" by Ronette and the Originals. The following day I went to the studio and watched him in the control booth. "Watch this," he told me. He dedicated "Angel Baby" over the airwaves: "This record is going to change your life. This record is for every person in love."

And he'd play the record, and as soon as it was over he'd play it again on the other turntable. Then he'd say, "I've got to hear 'Angel Baby' one more time, I can't believe this record." Then he'd skip some tunes and play "Angel Baby" from the middle of the disc and play the song constantly throughout his time slot. Deductions would precede every play, like, "This record is going out to Big Luke and Judy of the White Fence Gang in East L.A."

Next day Freed would come back in the office and say, "Well, it sold 25,000 pieces yesterday."

Alan Freed wasn't a disc jockey. He was the father of rock 'n' roll. Elvis Presley was the son, but Alan Freed was the father. He taught me many things. As long as the public bought your records it didn't make any difference what the industry thought of you. It was the people who bought the records that needed a hot record more than anybody. It was the success of the vinyl.

Free Press: They're saying now that Freed was a rock 'n' roll prophet.

Kim Fowley: Freed talked about black

music in almost a religious sense. He talked about Chuck Berry all the time, and would give long lectures on the importance of the black artist in America. He explained how white acts covered and exploited the black artists and how the public and consumers didn't know and weren't aware of black artistic contributions.

And he seemed to know the future. Once Bill Woods and I cut a record deploring the use of drugs, on a "Tell Laura I Love Her" level — the heroine dies in the end of a heroin overdose. We took the acetate to Freed. I always took discs and acetates to him. "This is a pop record about drugs," we told him. "You're early," he said. "Someday records about drugs will sell, but not now." That was in the summer of 1960.

After Freed left KDAY and was living in Florida I played him a record over the phone. He told me, "I don't think records like these will happen for a while. There's a big act coming around the corner." A year later the Beatles conquered America.

Free Press: What would Freed be into today?

Kim Fowley: He would have been appalled at today's radio — those tight formats and tight playlists. Alan Freed would have played the Ramones. He would have tracked Springsteen. He'd be dedicating "Rosita" every night.

Alan Freed would have ripped the turntables up if he heard all the imitations that clog the radio dial today. He would break Linda Ronstadt's remakes of things like "That'll Be The Day" and "Rescue Me," and would have become ill if he heard "Wonderful World" by Art Garfunkel.

I often wonder how Freed would have reacted to FM radio. I have a hunch he would have bombed the stations if he couldn't hear Bruce Springsteen or Van Morrison in his Bang period.

I don't think Freed would have played King of the Hill. Punk aren't sensitive enough for him.

I do think he would have liked disco. If people were dancing and in love he would have liked it.

Note: Alan Freed died broke and alcoholic in Palm Springs, California, 1965. He was 43.