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The Man Who Knew It *Wasn't* Only Rock 'n' Roll

By BERNARD WEINRAUB

HOLLYWOOD, Oct. 13 — Ask anyone under 30 about Alan Freed, and the response is probably a blank stare. After all, the legendary disc jockey died in obscurity and poverty in 1965 after a tumultuous career in which he introduced "rock 'n' roll" to the world and broke racial barriers.

With his triumphs he also dealt with crushing setbacks and crises as the center of the great payola scandal of the late 1950's and a target of J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, partly because rock-and-roll seemed so threatening. His world fell apart. He died at 43 of uremic poisoning.

"The fact is, many young people today aren't aware of who he is and what he had done," said Lindy DeKoven, executive vice president for movies and mini-series at NBC. "But the story of his life — what he did, the risks he took, the barriers he broke and his downfall — is remarkable."

The two-hour television drama, "Mr. Rock 'n' Roll: The Alan Freed Story," is to be broadcast on NBC on Sunday night. NBC has found something of a niche with splashy musical dramas about the 50's and 60's: in the last few years such shows as "The Temptations" and "The Sixties," have drawn large audiences, including many teen-agers.

The new film, which stars Judd Nelson as the disc jockey, is an adaptation by Matt Dorff of the 1991 book "Big Beat Heat: Alan Freed and the Early Years of Rock and Roll" by John A. Jackson. It was directed by Andy Wolk.

The film includes appearances by 50's teen idols like Fabian and Bobby Rydell (who play fathers outraged at the "evils" of rock-and-roll) and abundant musical sequences that use the original recordings of such performers as Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly and the Crickets, the Moonglows, Jackie Wilson, Bo Diddley, and Bill Haley and the Comets.

"This obsession with youth culture we see now is a direct legacy of Alan Freed," said Mr. Dorff. "He believed that teen-agers needed a culture of their own, and he gave them the kind of music that they could claim as theirs and theirs alone. He was also colorblind — he loved the beat, he loved the people who made the music, and the fact that they were black made no difference to him."

Mr. Freed — whose real name was Aldon James Freed — was a Cleveland D.J. playing mainstream music in 1951 when he eavesdropped on a group of black and white teen-agers who were dancing to a new music that made them want to "jump." He played this new black music at midnight nightly and it became a sensation. Mr. Freed soon went on the air as Moondog at WJW in Cleveland. The next year, at the Moondog Coronation Ball, considered the first rock concert, 20,000 fans crashed the 10,000-seat capacity Cleveland Arena. The dance was canceled.

By 1954 Mr. Freed was hired by WINS in New York City, and his career and fame took off even as he tangled with radio stations, television networks and the music business over playing the so-called black music.

"He was really the one that brought black rhythm-and-blues into mainstream American society, and he made a lot of enemies because of that," said Mr. Jackson, a retired elementary school teacher in Farmingdale, N.Y., who has written other books on rock. "Here was this white guy bringing blacks and whites together to dance in the 1950's. It was unheard of."

"He was also very emotional, outspoken, and said and did what he felt without considering the consequences," said Mr. Jackson. "He had enemies within the music business establishment, which was pushed aside by rock. And the F.B.I. had a file on him because of the power he commanded and because he was so close to black performers."

Near the peak of Mr. Freed's career, in 1957, ABC gave him a nationally televised rock 'n' roll show that was canceled after Frankie Lymon, the black performer, danced with a white girl on the show and enraged Southern affiliates.

Personal demons shadowed Mr. Freed. He was a workaholic, he was a womanizer, he couldn't hold his marriages (three) together, he was volatile. He began drinking heavily. "He ultimately fell because so many people wanted to see him fall," said Mr. Jackson. "He helped his enemies."

What finally brought down Mr. Freed was payola, the practice in which disc jockeys routinely received

cash from song pluggers to play a record. Mr. Jackson noted that, at the time, only New York and Pennsylvania had laws against payola. The system, he said, was legal in other states as long as the proceeds were reported to the Internal Revenue Service.

"A lot of guys lied," said Mr. Jackson. "He stood up and told Congress that everyone took payola. He said that what's payola to you is the same as lobbying to me. He told Congress that. He didn't know when to sit down and be quiet." In 1962, Mr. Freed pleaded guilty to two counts of commercial bribery and was fined $300. His career was over, and his personal life slid under the weight of alcoholism.

Mr. Freed's career was marred by other practices as well. Like other music industry insiders, he was accused of taking lucrative songwriting credits for songs that were actually written by members of the young groups he championed.

Mr. Jackson, who wrote the Freed biography, said that two members of the virtuoso group the Moonglows told him that Mr. Freed had no involvement with their big hit "Sincerely" yet took a writing credit for it and received the royalties.

He was listed for years as co-writer with Chuck Berry of another giant early rock hit, "Maybelline." Mr. Berry went to court eventually and succeeded in having Mr. Freed's name removed as co-writer.

Mr. Jackson said, however, that unlike other disc jockeys, Mr. Freed was a trained musician who was capable of writing songs and may have actually done so over the years.

Another expert on vintage rhythm and blues, Ronnie Italiano, the owner of Clifton Music, in Clifton, N.J., and an expert on the music, said he had considerable ambivalence about Freed.

On the one hand, he said, Freed's huge concerts with black rhythm-and-blues acts led record companies to realize the potentially huge teen-age audience for those performers. Members of the great harmony group the Flamingoes told him that they owed Mr. Freed a debt, even though he took credit for some songs that they wrote. "Their feeling was, if it wasn't for Freed, they never would have become popular," said Mr. Italiano.

Still, he said, others, like the later Bobby Lester of the Moonglows, bitterly resented him. Mr. Italiano said Lester was shoveling coal in Chicago to pay his rent while the song "Sincerely" was No. 1 on the hit parade.

Mr. Nelson, the actor, said that after reading the Jackson book, scouring Web sites and watching documentaries and videotapes about Freed, he is convinced that what finally crushed Freed was not payola but the racial breakthrough that the disc jockey almost unintentionally led. "He didn't see color, he saw music," said Mr. Nelson.

Unlike other disc jockeys, Freed stuck with black singers and groups whose songs were often "covered" by white acts. "It was a common occurrence in the 50's — Little Richard had a song and then Pat Boone would redo the song and the radio station would play the white version," said Mr. Nelson. "Alan Freed refused to do that. If Chuck Berry made it first, he wouldn't play anyone else doing that song. He made enemies because of it."

(Mr. Freed made additional enemies at the networks because he refused to focus his shows on white acts playing before white audiences as Dick Clark and other disc jockeys did.)

At its inaugural ceremonies in 1986, he was inducted posthumously into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, which through no accident was built in Cleveland.

James J. Kriegsmann/WINS

Left, Alan Freed, the disc jockey who introduced the world to rock and roll, in a photograph taken around 1955. Below, Judd Nelson as Freed in the TV drama, "Mr. Rock 'n' Roll: The Alan Freed Story."

John Meland/NBC