THE SALEM NEWS

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ALAN FREED

'Al J.,' just your average Salem teen, went on to become 'Mister Rock And Roll'

Alan Freed has become a great friend of mine.

I can see and hear him now, wowing his Salem High classmates with the "Sultans of Swing," a band with which Freed entertained at basketball games and Association dances. And there he is in the band room after school, sitting alone with his trombone, blowing tunes unlike any ever heard.

Here he comes over the airwaves on WJW in Cleveland, calling himself the Moondog, getting kids hip to music with a big beat — music that used to be called rhythm 'n' blues or "race" music but that now was known as rock 'n' roll because that's what Freed himself had decided to call it.

And there he is in his Connecticut home, sitting down on Sunday afternoon to listen to the newest records. The discs he doesn't like get tossed across the room. The ones he does enjoy — and it takes only a minute to tell — will almost certainly become hits because Freed is the most powerful and popular disc jockey in America.

In the mid-'50s, Alan Freed was king. A decade later, he was dead. In the mid-'50s, distraught parents, politicians and preachers said rock would die. Thirty years later, it has not. Alan Freed is no longer among us, but in a way he lives on because his legacy lives on and has grown into the top form of popular music and an industry of almost unmatched scale.

In 1985, rock — it doesn't roll nearly often as it should these days — is a corporate concern, backed by soft drink manufacturers, its fortunes guided by men in three-piece suits. Freed wouldn't have liked it this way.

But in 1955, when rock was young, it was a rebel yell, a reason to dance, a shot at eternal youth. It was art mixed with abandon. And Alan Freed made it all happen.

The drive to honor Freed in his hometown started last fall. I went to the Akron Radio Hall of Fame induction ceremonies and was surprised to discover none of the Freed family had been invited or had been able to attend the event. I later wrote the Hall of Fame's trustees, asking whether it would be possible to have Freed's unclaimed Hall of Fame plaque given a permanent home in Salem; I also mentioned the matter in an editorial page column in The Salem News. Bonnie and John Barnes of the Salem Music Centre said they'd be honored to display the plaque in their store. On Nov. 23, 1984, the presentation was made.

On that night, talk started of possibly including an event to honor Freed in Jubilee 179, perhaps a version of the "Moondog Rock 'n' Roll Parties" he made the rage while a disc jockey at WJW. As it has turned out, this year's entire Jubilee has become a salute to Freed, to the fabulous '50s and to "the Spirit of Salem."

This week — and on these pages — we celebrate Alan Freed via the memories of friends, family and co-workers who recalled the spirit and vision that were his trademarks. My thanks go to all those who agreed — in some cases, asked — to be interviewed, and to the people who provided photos and other memorabilia.

It's never goodbye, it's only goodnight ...

—JULIE FANSELOW
Entertainment Editor

"Certainly when you talk of radio in the early '50s, you are talking about the power of the disc jockey, and you are talking about Alan Freed," says Bob West, an assistant professor of telecommunications at Kent State University.

West was a student at KSU when he first met Alan Freed, who was working on the news staff at WAKR in Akron. "My very first time in front of a microphone was on Alan's show," he recalls. "He did that with kids — let them on his show. In those days, you could play anything. It didn't matter.

"One of the few accurate things in 'American Hot Wax' (the movie biography of Freed's life) was that scene when he had that kid in the studio. That really triggered my memory," West says.

West says another connection to the Freed family: His roommate at Kent was Alan's younger brother, David. Both were speech and broadcasting students and wrote dramas that were broadcast each week on WAKR. David Freed went on to become an attorney.

West again ran into Alan Freed when he had started his own career as a news reporter on WERE in Cleveland. By that time Freed had become the star DJ at WJW, and West says he used to go to the studio to watch him in action.

"He was a high-energy performer, he'd walk around the room a lot. It was always exciting around Alan. You felt something was happening. At that time, even he didn't know what it was, but it caught on," West says.

Those were the days Freed was playing rhythm and blues records he'd pick up at the Record Rendezvous shop owned and operated by Leo Mintz. R & B had gained a following among northern white teens who had done time in the Army and had discovered the music while stationed in the South. Freed wasn't the first to play R & B; the music hit the airwaves about 1946 at WLAC in Nashville, West explains. "But it had not been fine-tuned," he adds. Freed realized kids in the urban North were opening their ears to black music. "He came at just the right time, and he gave it a name," says West.

West lost touch with Freed after Freed had gone on to greater success in New York. Today West regularly teaches a course in radio programming that emphasizes the contributions made by Freed and other early disc jockeys Gene Nobles and Bill Randall. West doesn't feel Freed's name and work have been forgottern. "If you're into music, you've heard of Alan Freed," he says.

What has changed is the position of disc jockeys at most radio stations. "In Freed's day, the disc jockey selected the music, but when payola came along, the Federal Communications Commission forced station management to get into the music selection business," says West.

At one time, he adds, listeners identified primarily with the personalities of the men spinning the disc. Now there are few true personalities on the air, and any listener identification is with the station itself. Stations wanted more control, West says, adding, "They found they could get along without the stars."

West believed Alan Freed is "of major importance. I'm glad he's finally getting some recognition."

Alan (second from left) in the arms of his Uncle Al Palmer, a minstrel whose musical career helped influence Alan's decision to enter show business. With them are (from left) Charles Freed, David Freed and cousin Billie Ruth Sproat. The picture probably was taken in the mid-1920s in Johnstown, Pa., where the Freeds lived prior to moving to Ohio.

Sports and music were the two biggest things in the Freed brothers' lives, according to David Freed.

David, whom everyone called "Donnie" when he was a boy, was the youngest of the Freed sons. Today, he is an attorney with a practice in Painesville.

All of the boys were interested in music, but in addition, "Al and myself were very proud of the Perry Street Indians." The kids in Salem, he recalls, had their own neighborhood sports teams, not very organized and without adult supervision.

David also proves to be the best source of information on Charles Freed, the oldest of the Freeds' three sons. A graduate of the Salem High in 1936, he left as his legacy the high school fight song. He went on to graduate from Ohio State University and shortly after World War II became music director for the Columbia Broadcasting System.

Today, David says, Charles is retired and lives in Salt Lake City. In later years, he was a freelance composer and performer; among his projects was a series of segment produced for the Mormon Church called "Windows." The shows featured looks at Mormon history and were broadcast about eight times daily. Charles wrote all the scripts and music.

David says he believes Alan knew early on that he wanted to pursue a career in show business. David appeared to be leaning that way himself for a time; he went to Kent State University as a radio speech major and was the first program director for WKSU when it went on the air as the campus station.

Following graduation, he and Alan opened the Alan Freed School of Radio and Television in Akron. David says the school was in business during Freed's heyday in Ohio from 1950 through 1954. The brothers also worked together during those years at Lance Distribution,

Alan Freed ruled the airwaves with his rock 'n' roll show on WINS. Freed went to the New York station after successfully launching the rock craze at Cleveland's WJW radio.

the record distribution firm Alan started and named for his son.

When Alan decided to go to New York he asked David if he wanted to accompany him. David had, by that time, he recalls, "developed a real distaste' for the music business. He decided to stay in Ohio and he enrolled in law school.

David says his brother was an industry pioneer at every stage in his career. During the year he did not work in radio, "television had just broken, and Alan was the second, maybe the third television performer in the Cleveland market. That was WXEL, which later became channel 8."

Lance Distribution was one of the first independent distribution firms "in that we handled records other than the major brands. I think one of Al's greatest accomplishments is he was probably more instrumental in busting the ASCAP stranglehold on music in this country; he probably had more impact on that than anyone else."

At the time, David notes, radio stations had contracted with ASCAP only to play the association's music, and music publishers had made similar agreements. "Not everyone could get into ASCAP; only Irving Berlin could get into ASCAP," he adds. "Al's playing what were then termed race records — rhythm and blues, which were really the beginning of the rock 'n' roll thing — that had more impact on the music industry than anything else.

positive," he says. "He was a lover of fun and if he couldn't find it, he'd provide it. He also was an opportunist, always alert and on the ball and ready to take advantage of opportunity."

Raymond says Alan Freed was "a liberal in a conservative environment" and when he had found his niche in show business "there was no coming back."

"When Alan got a taste of big-city life, when he tasted his dreams of success, there was very little desire on his part to return to the quiet and conservativism of Salem," he says.

Raymond stayed in touch with Charles and Maude Freed even after their sons had left Salem. "They lived here, died here and are buried here," he says, recalling they spent their later days in a green-shingled home along Third Street.

Whenever they would meet on the street, he adds, "the conversation always centered on the boys." Maude Freed always "had a great deal of pride in Alan," he adds.

When Freed's fortunes fell in the early '60s, his radio career all but destroyed by allegations of payola, his parents defended their son's honor. "As far as Maude was concerned, he was OK. She didn't lose confidence in him," Raymond says.

Raymond is happy the Salem community has decided to pay tribute to Alan Freed. "I didn't say Alan Freed was perfect. None of us are," he says, "but I say there is a time to forget, a time to heal, a time to celebrate. He made a very tremendous impact on the American social scene."

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"Alan was older than I but I knew him pretty well and his whole family very well," says Lou Raymond of North Union Avenue. "I admired this family — all the Freed children attended the same Sunday School I did, down at the First Baptist Church where the Village Green is now."

Although Maude Freed, Alan's mother, was a faithful member of the congregation, Raymond recalls Charles Freed did not attend except on special occasions. He was Jewish and went to a synagogue in Youngstown, Raymond says. "I remember it as a unique marriage, in the community of Salem probably the only marriage of that type, but they apparently had no problems over this," he adds.

"The boys were very talented, outstanding musicians," Raymond recalls. Charles was a pianist, Al J. played trombone and Donnie was "an exceptional boy soprano" who often was called on to sing at public events in town. Maude Freed also loved music, "and I'm sure through her sons, her love of music was realized and personified," says Raymond.

He remembers how, as a trombone player, Al J. "was always sort of into jazz, trying to get little twirls in the trombone, notes that weren't really in the score.

"My memories of Alan are very

A young Alan Freed, who — during his days at Salem High School — was active in band, school drama, the newspaper and yearbook, and the golf team. He was a member of the Class of 1940.

came in to control the crowd, and Freed stopped the show several times to settle the audience down. The real trouble began after the show, when, according to city officials, there were muggings and looting. Freed was indicted three days later for "inciting a riot and attempting to overthrow the government."

Back in New York, WINS fired Freed in the wake of bad publicity about the station's star and the trouble in Boston. Freed continued his nightly show on WNEW-TV and signed on with WABC radio in New York. He had divorced his second wife and, although he still had a large home in Connecticut, lived in Manhattan.

1959. The broadcast industry turned its attention toward a new scandal, "payola," which involved disc jockeys accepting bribes for favoring certain records on the air. Investigations were conducted in New York, Philadelphia and Detroit, and by Congressman Oren Harris, whose subcommittee had already made news by exposing rigged television game shows.

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1960-1962. Freed moved to California and signed on with KDAY in Los Angeles. Back in New York, Freed was indicted on several counts of commercial bribery, the legal term for "payola." He pleaded not guilty, fought the charges for several years and ultimately pleaded no contest and was fined $300.

After his stint at KDAY, Freed worked for Mercury Records and for WGAM in Miami. He married his third wife, Inga.

1964. Freed, who had been unable to handle his finances since Platt's departure, was indicted on income tax evasion charges. Some of the charges were later dismissed, according to Rutledge.

Shortly after Christmas, Freed was admitted to a Palm Springs hospital with severe stomach problems. Doctors believe the ailment might have been brought on by long-term effects suffered after a car accident that occurred while Freed was in Cleveland.

1965. Alan Freed died Jan. 20, 1965. The official cause of death was listed as uremia, a kidney disorder, but Rutledge wrote "There are many today who insist he died of a broken heart."

(Details from the chronology are taken primarily from "Alan Freed: A Forgotten Hero of Rock 'n' Roll," written by Jeff Rutledge and published in Record Auction Monthly magazine.)

Alan Freed, 1921-1965: A chronology

Dec. 15, 1921. Aldon James Freed was born in Johnstown, Pa., to Charles and Maude Freed. (His birth date may have been Dec. 15, 1922; brother David believes it was 1922, but Freed biographer Jeff Rutledge says records indicate it was 1921.)

Mid-1920s. The Freeds moved to Salem. At first they lived along Ellsworth Avenue between Third and Fourth streets; later on Seventh Street; and still later, along South Lincoln Avenue at about Perry Street.

1936-1940. Alan's years at Salem Senior High School. He played trombone in and was president of the school band, served as a drum major, worked on the school newspaper and yearbook staffs, took part in school plays, was a member of the golf team. After school he led a band called "The Sultans of Swing" that tplayed at dances and school functions.

1940-1945. Although indications were Freed knew he wanted to pursue a career in radio, he looked to military after graduation and was sent to Wisconsin with the Army ski patrol. He served only a year and was discharged after developing an ear infection. He attended Ohio State University for a year before returning to Salem to work as an inspector at The Mullins Manufacturing Co., where he met Betty Lou Bean of Lisbon, who would become his wife.

During this time, Freed enrolled in a broadcasting school in Youngstown. After completing his course, he took several jobs — one back in Pennsylvania at $17 a week, another at WKBN in Youngstown. He worked mostly as a news and sports reporter.

1945. Freed signed with WAKR in Akron. He started out as a news staffer but asked management to let him try his hand at being a disc jockey. He proved to be a natural at it.

1947. Freed had moved up to musical director at WAKR. His show, "Request Review," was the city's top-rated radio program, and he was commanding a $10,000 salary. "He could have very well gone on to a long, successful career with AKR, earning a decent salary while enjoying the comforts of a local celebrity, but Alan Freed had a different destiny," writes Jeff Rutledge.

1948. Freed left WAKR. He had pioneered playing "race" records on the radio and despite tremendous listener reaction, WAKR officials felt they had lost control of Freed. He began to join the staff of a radio station across the street, but his former employers pointed out a clause in his contract which barred him from working for a rival station for a year after his departure.

1950. Freed signed with WJW in Cleveland after spending a year as host of a movie program on Cleveland's WXEL-TV. The WJW job was landed with the help of another Salemite, Lew Platt, who became Freed's manager.

1951-1952. Freed introduced rock 'n' roll to the teenagers of northeast Ohio on his "Moondog Rock 'n' Roll Party" show on WJW. He also planned to host what would have been the first rock concert ever at the Cleveland Arena on March 21, 1952, but the "Moondog Coronation Ball" was called off when police feared the concert had been oversold.

1954. With a new wife, Jacqueline, and a $75,000 contract from WINS radio, Freed moved to New York. Just before his move, a Cleveland record distributor claimed Freed was sending our letters telling distributors he wanted money if their records were to be heard on his show. The story was generally disputed because the man who alleged the letters had been sent was a competitor of Freed's — Freed also was co-owner of Lance Distribution — but the rumors surfaced again later when investigators started looking into illegal practices within the record industry.

1954. Freed ruled the airwaves on WINS. His rock 'n' roll shows, staged with the help of Platt, were all the rage in New York. Columbia Pictures asked Freed to star with Bill Haley and the comets in "Rock Around the Clock," the first rock 'n' roll movie and the first of five films Freed would make.

Freed also was a successful songwriter, and he worked to help black artists to break radio's racial barriers to begin careers. He refused to play "cover" records — those done by white artists and released simultaneously as the same song done by a black artist in what white artists and record companies referred to as an attempt to "legitimize" the song. WINS adopted his policy for all disc jockeys. Freed's actions on behalf of black artists got him called a "nigger lover" and prompted death threats, but he did not alter his stance.

1957. Freed made the films "Rock, Rock, Rock" and "Mister Rock and Roll." He briefly landed a show on ABC-TV, but it was pulled after just one week because one of Freed's guests — Frankie Lymon, the young lead singer of the Teenagers — danced with a white girl from the studio audience.

1958. Freed lost the services of Lew Platt as his manager. It was, Rutledge writes, "a sad departure" brought on by people who were out to "get" Freed and who realized the best way to undermine him would be to destroy what he had so carefully guided his financial dealings.

With his new manager, Jack Hooke, Freed planned a six-week tour to take his New York rock 'n' roll shows cross-country. Among the acts on the bill were Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly and the Crickets, Jerry Lee Lewis and Joann Campbell.

The tour started without a hitch, playing to packed houses, but on May 3, trouble brewed in Boston. Police came in to control the crowd, and Freed stopped the show several times to settle the audience down. The real trouble began after the show, when, according to city officials, there were muggings and looting. Freed was indicted three days later for "inciting a riot and attempting to overthrow the government."

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