

THE PLAIN DEALER

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SPORTS FINAL

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Moondog milestone

Remembering the world's first rock concert

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Plain Dealer Pop Music Critic

It was billed as "the most terrible ball of them all."

It turned out to be the Big Bang of live rock 'n' roll.

Disc jockey Alan Freed's Moondog Coronation Ball, held 50 years ago today at the Cleveland Arena, certainly lived up to the pre-show hype, ending in chaos.

But after the dust settled and the broken glass was swept away, a new era of live entertainment had dawned.



Alan Freed

The Moondog Ball went down in the history books as the world's first rock concert.

The venue was huge, the turnout was unprecedented, the sounds were fresh and the fans were ready to party.

It was like no other show before it and inspired everything that came after it, from Woodstock to Lollapalooza.

"It made the music industry wake up

and say, 'Who is this guy and what is this music and how did it draw 25,000 people for a dance?'" says Lance Freed, son of the legendary DJ. "It was a turning point."

On the bill that night was a cavalcade of acts, including Paul Williams & the Hucklebuckers, Tiny Grimes & the Rockin' Highlanders, the Dominoes, and Varetta Dillard. Tickets were \$1.50 in advance, \$1.75 at the door.

But the show ended abruptly, shut down by police because the Arena was dangerously overcrowded.

SEE FREED | A22

**MOONDOG
CORONATION BALL
CLEVELAND ARENA**
3717 EUGLES AVENUE - CLEVELAND, OHIO
FRIDAY NITE, MAR. 21
10 P.M. to 2 A.M.

IN PERSON FEATURING THESE SENSATIONAL STARS IN PERSON

PAUL WILLIAMS ★ **TINY GRIMES**
HUCKLEBUCKERS ROCKIN' HIGHLANDERS

THE DOMINOES ★ **DANNY COBB**

MANY OTHERS! • **VARETTA DILLARD** • **MANY OTHERS!**

THE MOONDOG RADIO SHOW
WITH **ALAN FREED** IN PERSON
BROADCAST OVER WTVY DIRECT FROM THE BILL

Adv. Sale Tickets \$1.50 Adm. at Door \$1.75
TICKETS NOW ON SALE IN CLEVELAND AT BROADWAY THEATRE, 100 MARKET
AND AT NEWMAN'S AND THE ARENA BOX OFFICE
TICKETS AT THESE LOCATIONS SUBJECT TO SPACE AVAILABLE

The poster for the concert organized by Alan Freed, whose listeners were called the Moondoggers.

FREED

FROM A1

Remembering world's first rock concert

"Moondog Ball Is Halted as 6,000 Crash Gate" read the headline on the front page of The Plain Dealer.

"A crowd of about 6,000 persons, dissatisfied because they could not buy tickets to the Moondog Coronation Ball at the Arena, pushed down doors and entered," The Plain Dealer reported. "About 9:30, they stormed the Arena, knocking down four panel doors, brushing police away, and poured inside."

Crowd estimates ranged from 16,000 to 25,000. Emmett Greshan, 25, of Cleveland was stabbed and treated at St. Vincent Charity Hospital for "a wound on the left cheek," according to The Plain Dealer. An unidentified 20-year-old concertgoer was arrested for fighting.

Valena Williams covered the event for the Call and Post. "What I watched was one of the most terrifying experiences I ever hope to have," she wrote. "The floor was filling, growing more and more crowded as I watched."

Williams was looking forward to catching Grimes, one of her favorite acts. But he was drowned out by the ever-growing throng.

"I remember thinking, 'This is a big crowd,'" she says. "I couldn't hear the music. So I wasn't going to stick around."

As she headed for an exit, thousands of gatecrashers rushed into the Arena, which could hold only 10,000 people. (It was torn down in 1977.)

"It was just like a rush of cattle — everyone pushing, yelling, angry!" Williams wrote.

She eventually made it to safety. But she says she will never forget the "awful" feeling of being caught in the middle of the mob. "It was out of control," she says.

'Rockin' and rollin'

Edward Wolfeld was at the show, too. At the time, he was a manager at Record Rendezvous. The popular Prospect Avenue

"This was so new — this type of music bringing people together."

Edward Wolfeld,
*a manager at Record
Rendezvous at the time*

music store, owned by Leo Mintz, sponsored Alan Freed's WJW radio show.

"It was unreal," Wolfeld recalls. "This was so new — this type of music bringing people together. Everyone was excited . . . clapping, singing, having a good time. There were just too many people."

He insists it was Mintz, not Freed, who first used a variation of the phrase "rock 'n' roll" (an old blues euphemism for sex) to describe the scene at the Moondog Ball. "Leo was watching these kids dancing and he said, 'Look at them, rockin' and rollin' out there,'" Wolfeld says.

The following morning, a long line of angry concertgoers was waiting outside Record Rendezvous to demand refunds. "There were thousands of them . . . all the way around the block," Wolfeld says. "I thought they were going to tear the store apart."

Freed gave his side of the story on his radio program. "If anybody, even in their wildest imagination, had told us that some 25,000 people would try to get into a dance, I suppose you would have been just like me — you probably would have laughed and said they were crazy," he said. "I promise you that everything will be righted, that everybody will be happy."

"I know he felt terrible the next day, because he had been accused of overselling the show," Lance Freed says. "He took a lot of heat for it."

A career boost

Alan Freed was born near Johnstown, Pa., and raised in Salem, Ohio. After stints at radio stations in Youngstown and Akron, he landed a job at Cleveland's WJW in 1951, spinning R&B records (then known as

“race” records) by black artists.

The music he came to call rock ‘n’ roll was a hit with black and white listeners alike. So was Freed, a flamboyant on-air talent who would growl, howl and pound phone books like drums.

Despite the melee, the Moondog Ball wasn’t a career setback for Freed. If anything, the publicity generated by the concert boosted his profile, says Harvey Fuqua of the Moonglows, a doo-wop group managed by Freed in

the ‘50s.

“It didn’t stop him,” Fuqua says. “He was defiant. He was going to make sure this music was heard. He knew he was onto something.”

Freed left Cleveland in 1954 to broadcast “The Alan Freed Rock ‘n’ Roll Show” from New York City. He went on to appear in films, including “Rock Around the Clock.” He also was host of the television show “Dance Party.”

His career ended on a sour note amid a congressional investigation into payola. Freed pleaded guilty to two counts of commercial bribery in 1962. Three years later, he died of uremic poisoning. He was 43.

Other influential DJs did their part to make Cleveland a hot market for new music, including Bill Randle, Billy Bass and Kid Leo. But none had a greater impact than Freed. Indeed, Cleveland staked its claim to the Rock

and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum — where a Freed exhibit is in the works — on his legacy.

“I prefer to think of him as a midwife at the birth of rock ‘n’ roll,” Lance Freed says. “He helped deliver it. The music was already there. . . . The Moondog Coronation Ball was the conception date.”

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