

Rock 'n Roll 'n Alan Freed

BY THE ODOREIRWIN

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IN RECENT YEARS, getting upset over the mysteries of teen-age behavior has almost become a national pastime. A noisy crowd is just a crowd, for instance, unless it's composed of adolescents and then it's labelled a "riot." And lately, when youngsters get into trouble, adults groping for a scapegoat have pointed an accusing finger at a new "corrupter of youth"

-that "awful music," rock 'n' roll.

If you have normal hearing, you must be aware of this musical phenomenon with its undulating, two-beat rhythm. Apparently rock 'n' roll has no charms to soothe the savage breast, for its impact upon youthful masses has been at times explosively violent. In Boston, Washington, Minneapolis, Atlanta -across and up-and-down the nation -over-exhilarated teenagers in many rock 'n' roll audiences have screeched and screamed, smashed windows, thrown beer bottles, bowled over police, wrecked theatres and dance halls, and produced blaring headlines.

In the frenzy 'n' furor accompanying each breach of peace, horrified parents, harried police and some vocal social scientists have viewed such goings-on with alarm. Elders have fumed, fretted, pontificated and legislated against the "craze." Sporadically, rock 'n' roll has been officially banned in some public places. Eminent psychologists, sociologists and psychiatrists have characterized rock 'n' roll as everything from "adolescent rebellion" to "a medieval type of spontaneous lunacy."

Yet millions of youngsters virtually live by rock 'n' roll and every day more and more of them are becoming exponents. Ninety percent of all single records-45 rpm-are bought by teenagers and many record companies are operating on a three-shift basis to fill orders for rock 'n' roll. The young devotees will tell you that disapproving "middle-aged" people - anyone over 25-are hopeless squares who fail to keep up with the times and now condemn what they don't understand.

"We're having some fun before we get too old to enjoy ourselves" said one 15-year-old girl in a recent Gilbert Youth Research survey.

Is rock 'n' roll merely harmless teen-age fun? Or is it something more dangerous?

Any serious investigation probing for the answers to these questions inevitably runs smack into a shrewd, cool-headed, knowledgeable and surprising young man named Alan Freed. He coined the phrase, "rock and roll," and not only sparked the trend but fanned it into flame.

Today, he is the acknowledged high priest of the rock 'n' roll cult, the Pied Piper and dedicated evangelist of the teenagers' Big Beat.

"Rock 'n' roll is kids," he says.

"It's not me or Elvis Presley or anyone else. The music belongs to them-they had a need for it and they discovered it. I don't set the pace-these kids do."

Until fairly recently, the name of Alan Freed had no meaning to most adults, despite his astonishing popularity with the younger generation. Then, three rock 'n' roll movies he made for Columbia jammed theatres all over the world, causing "riots" as far off as Pakistan. His stage shows and rock 'n' roll parties in various cities have stampeded audiences.

Last Washington's Birthday, for example, some typically tumultuous scenes were enacted in New York's Times Square, in and around the Paramount Theatre. The program included a Freed rock 'n' roll movie, his 20-piece orchestra, assorted live entertainers and Freed in-person, billed as "The King of Rock 'n' Roll." Before dawn, at 4:00 A.M., teenagers with lunch-boxes started queuing up. During the day, 13,120 "cats" poured into Times Square, overflowing sidewalks, tying up traffic, pushing over barriers. As a result, 175 cops were called out.

Between shows, Freed stepped out through the stage door for a breath of air. Instantly, a group of high school students descended on him. Before he could retreat, they tore off his jacket, Ivy League cap, tie and cuff-links for souvenirs.

"I love it," he told me later, in the seclusion of his Stamford, Conn., home "I love being mobbed by kids. I wouldn't want it to stop."

It's understandable that such adulation is welcomed by Freed. Virtually overnight, this super-salesman has played rock 'n' roll

to a \$200,000 -a-year income. As a diskjockey for New York's station WINS, his program reaches 12 states and Newfoundland. On tape he's heard in Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City and over the powerful Radio Luxemburg throughout Europe and England. His first movie, *Rock Around the Clock*, has grossed a profit of \$3,000,000.

On the side, Freed writes songs, makes records, leads a band, emcees shows and is a partner in two music publishing firms and a record company. One of his song-hits, Sincerely, sold 2,000,000 records. Last year, one of his in-person shows in Brooklyn brought out a record \$228,000 crowd in a single week.

"In this business," he says candidly, "your career is so short, you've got to get it from all angles."

To understand the why and how of rock 'n' roll, you've got to know The King. A wiry, intense chain-smoking, 35-year-old dynamo, Alan Freed is actually shyly introverted despite his "hard-sell" radio technique. He's a devoted family man with no visible qualities of a romantic idol, and it's difficult for adults to understand why hordes of young girls call him "the greatest, the most est. Before a microphone, however, this rock 'n' roll spieler "sends" the younger generation as a record spins, he slaps out the characteristic beat on a telephone book, shouts "Go! Go! Go!" or "Blow, man, blow!" He has a grand time, he says, enjoying the music along with the kids.

About half a million fan letters and telegrams deluge him during a year. Close to 7,000 Alan Freed Fan Clubs, each with ten to 300 members, have sprung up in the past couple of years. What, precisely, is the magnet?

"Teenagers believe in me," he explains, "because they know I'm their friend and give them the music they want."

To vehement, vitriolic criticism of rock 'n' roll, Freed says he usually turns the other cheek. But one recent Sunday afternoon, talking to me while relaxed on a couch in his studio at home, the King of Rock 'n' Roll sounded off.

"What are those psychologists yelling about?" he said. "They don't know these kids and have probably never seen a rock 'n' roll show. Our teenagers aren't bad-they're just enthusiastic."

"No music can be morally bad. Whether he's playing a ukulele or listening to rock 'n' roll records, a child is cutting his teeth on music, and I say he's on the path to finer music. In fact, one recent survey revealed that about 37 percent of teenagers enjoy opera or classical records as well as rock 'n' roll."

Undeniably, Freed had something. Throughout the country, a strong upsurge of interest in all kinds of music has been reported.

"Rock 'n' roll was discovered by the kids themselves," Freed went on. "They feel it's new; for their generation alone. Before it came along, they were starved for entertainment. The ballad-type music they'd been hearing was too soupy and languid for dancing. Television offered very little musical variety for them. So when they encountered the powerful, affirmative jazz beat of rock 'n' roll, it was like making an exciting discovery."

To show how rock 'n' roll "belongs" to the youngsters, Freed cited scores of simple songs aimed directly at them: *Teen-Age Crush*, *Young Love*, *Sitting in the Balcony*, *Teen-Age Prayer*. Many of the popular rock 'n' roll performers are their peers, groups such as The Six Teens, The Teenagers and The Teen Chords.

"Like adolescents of every generation," Freed pointed out, "today's teenagers have a need to be part of something vital, reach out for some form of group participation. Rock 'n' roll gives it to them. They also have to blow off steam and rock 'n' roll is a harmless way of using up excess energy.

"Our in-person shows, for instance, are a wonderful outlet. When performers come on stage, the children jump and scream, drowning out the entertainers. Why? Because the kids' have listened to records of those songs and know every note and word, so they do the performing. The show is in the audience, not on the stage.

"Youngsters today are happy because of rock 'n' roll. That's what many parents don't realize. The kids are happy about their music because at last they have something they can understand and dance to. Look at them some time, clapping their hands and tapping their feet to records. Their exuberance is rock 'n' roll jubilation. Even the songs are happy. Yet our critics call rock 'n' roll madness. Is it madness for kids to enjoy themselves?"

That's what the man says, and there's no doubt about his sincerity. And maybe he's not far off base. While many psychologists, educators and clergymen are still blasting rock 'n' roll, others have lately swung around to a tolerance of the musical fad. Prof. Sigmund A. Piotrowski of N.Y.U. concedes that "youth must express itself in some overt energetic manner." Dr. Karl Bowman, a distinguished psychiatrist, maintains that rock 'n' roll "is an emotional outlet for young folk rebelling against their elders and there's nothing dangerous or very unusual about it. One sociologist feels that rock 'n' roll stems from the same virus which induced panty raids and goldfish swallowing.

Freed is honestly convinced that rock 'n' roll is "good" for children and he backs up his contention with piles of fan letters. Boys have written that once they hung around street corners at night and now they stay home with their rock 'n' roll records. Many teenagers write something like this: "My parents are too busy going to parties. If I didn't have rock 'n' roll, I don't know what I'd do,"

Rock 'n' roll burst upon the nation, via Freed, virtually by accident. Until then, he was an obscure toiler on the airwaves.

Born in Johnstown, Pa., of a Welsh mother and a Lithuanian Jewish father, a clothing salesman, Alan was raised largely in Salem, Ohio. At 12, he took to the trombone, soon organized a high-school band, and played dance dates at fifty cents a man. With his earnings, he traveled as far as 200 miles to stand in line for hours to watch Benny Goodman or Artie Shaw. In those days he, too, used to dance in theatre aisles and grown-ups were blasting swing as a dangerous evil.

At Ohio State, where he studied mechanical engineering and hated it, Freed one day peered through the window of the campus radio station. "That was it—I was gone," he recalls. After a brief stretch in the Army and as an ordnance inspector, he landed a \$17-a-week radio job in which he did everything from sweeping floors to writing continuity and acting as engineer for his shows.

For a while Freed was a sports announcer and disk jockey in Akron, then moved on to WJW in Cleveland. One day in 1951, he was approached by his friend, Leo Mintz, owner of Cleveland's largest record shop. Mintz had noticed that so-called "race" records—rhythm and blues seemed to be getting more and more popular. If Alan would do a special show with them, Mintz would sponsor it. At first Freed was reluctant but Mintz persuaded him to go along.

What could they call the show? The racial "stigma" of rhythm and blues, hitherto aimed only at the Negro market, had to be somehow avoided if a wider audience was to be reached. So Freed and Mintz sat around playing records, searching for a name. As he listened, tapping his feet and rocking to the heavy back beat, Freed diffidently suggested: "How about this—The Rock and Roll Party?"

His program 'caught on like a barn fire. The next year, to cash in on his rhetoric success, Freed planned a rock and roll ball at the Cleveland Arena, which has a capacity of 10,000. About 9,000 tickets were sold in advance. On the night of the ball, however, 30,000 persons showed up, crashing the doors down and bowling over the cops. That show, first of the rock 'n' roll "riots," had to be

called off. But apparently the crowd had such a grand time breaking into the Arena that no one asked for his money back.

Thereafter, Freed staged eight reserved-seat shows, all sell-outs.

His fame spread to New York and in 1954 came the inevitable high-priced deal for a rock 'n' roll disk jockey show on WINS. Four months later, he threw two rock 'n' roll dances at the St. Nicholas Arena in New York.

"In a way," he recalls, "those St. Nick dances were the turning point. You see, those Cleveland affairs appealed most to colored people. In fact, after I ran them, I received batches of poison-pen letters calling me a 'nigger-lover.' But at the St. Nick the audiences were about 70 percent white and 30 percent Negro. This was the first inkling I had that white people enjoyed rhythm and blues. Rock 'n' roll had moved out of the limited 'race' classification into big business."

Freed has four children, ranging in age from two to eleven. All of them, he contends, are rock 'n' rollers; even the youngest, Alan, Jr., "shakes his butt" in rhythm to the music. On every show he talks about his children and his wife, Jackie. A sleek, Vogue-type beauty, Jackie helps handle Freed's mail, accompanies him to his in-person shows and always gets a big hand when she's introduced to the audience. Almost every fan letter ends with, "Give my love to Jackie and the little Freeds."

This is the family man whom detractors charge is demoralizing American youth.

Near his renovated 16-room mansion overlooking Long Island Sound in an exclusive section of Stamford, Conn., Freed has fixed up an old stable as his broadcasting studio. There, every weekday evening from six-to-ten, he spins his platters and chatters away. After the show, he walks to his house where he and Jackie have a late meal while the King of Rock 'n' Roll listens on his hi-fi to guess-what? Classical records. His favorites are Beethoven's *Pastorale*, Tchaikovsky's *Pathetique*.

At midnight he returns to the studio and concentrates until three in the morning on auditioning new rock 'n' roll records, trying to figure out what teenagers will like.

A home-bound character, Freed never goes to night clubs. His only hobby is renovating and decorating his recently acquired 50-year-old house. His consuming drive, however, is a passionate crusade for acceptance of rock 'n' roll as a legitimate musical development.

"Rock 'n' roll," he says reflectively, "is a great river of music into which many streams flow. It really began over a hundred years ago, in the cotton fields and on the levees, with work songs, spirituals and river songs. It's just our own American music, earthy and soulful.

"Rut rock 'n' roll has added something of its own: the roiling two-beat rhythm with the accent on every second beat. Only the young in heart can dig that socking syncopation. For those who hate it, I think it's too much excitement for their tired arteries."

Put rock and roll in its historical perspective, Freed urges. A British psychiatrist, Dr. J. Macalister Brew, recently observed that adolescents today are basically no different from those of any other generation. In every era, he contended, any new type of music or dancing has become the fashionable craze of the 15 to 25-year-old age group. The Charleston and Turkey Trot were less violent and anti-social only because they were in a less violent era.

Recently, Freed had dinner with Paul Whiteman, King of Jazz in the Twenties. Whiteman showed him a fat scrapbook filled with contemporary denunciations. In 1927, for example, the Bishop of Dubuque was quoted as saying: "Jazz is leading the youth of America down the primrose path to hell. Jazz must be stopped."

Similar abuse was hurled in the Thirties at Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman and the swooning, sweated bobby-soxers. Swing was gravely condemned as "a depraved outgrowth of the depression years." When Goodman, then King of Swing, played New York's Paramount Theatre in 1939, his young disciples were so noisy-many of them rushing onto the stage-that Goodman had to stop his show with the *Star Spangled Banner*.

"I've never had it that bad with rock 'n' roll," Freed points out. "When kids stand on seats or dance in the aisles, I hold up my hands and ask them nicely to please sit down and we'll continue with the show. That's all I have to do. As for rock 'n' roll dancing, which shocks some oldsters as 'immoral,' remember the Lindy Hop."

Actually, rock 'n' roll dancing is almost identical with the jitter-bugging of the late Thirties although it's less bouncy, more undulating-the dancer's feet stay more on the floor. Moreover, today's dancing is far from intimate-the wriggling youngsters barely touch hands, and appear oblivious to each other. Even disk jockey Martin Block, who has disparaged rock 'n' roll as monotonous, concedes that it has gotten the youngsters back on the dance floor and is paving the way for a return to good music.

What about Elvis Presley? The pelvis-wiggler, according to Freed, is not a genuine rock 'n' roller. "He really sings hill-billy or country-and-western style I think Presley is a fine, w&manned young guy, a wonderful performer with lots of ability. But I wish he'd shave off his sideburns."

Is rock 'n' roll contributing to juvenile delinquency?

"Nonsense!" says Freed sharply. "Rock 'n' roll came along just when delinquency was getting a lot of publicity, so it's convenient to make a musical trend the butt for adult failures. It was also unfortunate that rock 'n' roll music was used in that hoodlum-infested movie, *The Blackboard jungle*, which seemed to associate rock 'n' rollers with delinquents."

What about those jeans and leather jackets some rock 'n' rollers wear? Are they a sinister symbol, as some critics charge, of moral decay? Freed snorts that Hollywood is to blame for that, too. "Those kids are aping Marlon Brando and James Dean. The hoodlum element is only a minority of maybe five percent. Why malign all teenagers?"

Rock 'n' rollers are good kids, Freed emphasizes, and he relates a revealing incident to prove it. Last year, Freed was asked by the National Nephrosis Foundation to be chairman of a *Teen-Age March for Childhood Nephrosis*. His assignment was to organize youngsters to distribute literature and coin cards. On the appointed day, the weather was miserably cold and sleety. Yet 19,000 Freed aficionados showed up all over the New York metropolitan and suburban area. Each child spent at least four hours on his job and they distributed over a million coin cards and pieces of literature. But there wasn't a line in the press commending them.

"What do we have to do," one rock 'n' roller wrote Freed, "to prove most of us kids are O.K.?"

What's the future of rock 'n' roll? Is it just a passing fancy?

"I think," says Freed, "it will settle itself into the mainstream of American popular music. In fact, it's starting to, right now, as it reaches out and embraces country and western artists. Eventually 'pure' rock 'n' roll will be replaced by a watered-down version that combines the best with normal Tin Pan Alley pop tunes. Whiteman's jazz and Goodman's swing each tasted about ten years and I expect rock 'n' roll will, too. In ten years my band will be playing at the

Waldorf Astoria, just as Benny Goodman is doing now."

For the present, Alan Freed rocks along, gathering legions of young converts with what bandleader Lucky Millinder has called "the fire and excitement of evangelist Billy Graham." Accounting for his prodigious appeal, Freed points to one prime factor:

"I believe in what I'm doing."

"What do you think that is?" he was asked.

"Making kids happy."

Listening to the King of Rock 'n' Roll, you can't help feeling that maybe our vibrating teenagers are not being "demoralized" by a "medieval lunacy" after all. If anxious parents want to improve the situation, Dr. Brew suggests, they'll have to provide adolescents with "safer and more self-controlled methods of experiencing excitement, physical and emotional release." That way children will "have fun with the current crazes" but won't be so lonely that something like rock 'n' roll becomes an "all-absorbing compensatory addiction."

Until the next musical fad comes along, it appears that rock 'n' roll can't do our youth any serious harm. Let 'em go, man, go! | B

