

# The ROCK and ROLL STORY

# Alan Freed

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# Alan Freed



Article VI

By CHARLES GRUENBERG

(With Peter J. McElroy and Bennett Schiff)

It would, of course, be an exaggeration to say that without Alan Freed, there would be no Elvis Presley craze today.

But it is not overstating the case to say that Freed, more than any other person, was responsible for bringing Rock and Roll into the national consciousness, and thus prepared the way for the coming of a Presley.

As Norman Orleck, associate editor of *Cashbox*, said:

"About the time Freed came to New York, Rock and Roll was already beginning to move. Some record companies had found that there was an increasing sale of Negro rhythm and blues records to whites.

"What Freed did was to burst this trend into full flame."

Although Freed is well known by name and voice from northern

New Jersey to southern Massachusetts, and is beginning to expand his influence through Great Britain and Europe, comparatively little is known about him as a person.

This is partly the fault of Freed himself. A rather shy guy, despite his "hard-sell" radio technique, Freed does not go out of his way to get personal publicity. In one respect, he's a rarity in the entertainment business—he doesn't have a press agent.

Freed was born Dec. 15, 1922, in Johnstown, Pa., son of Charles Sidney Freed and Maude Palmer Freed. The elder Freed, a Russian Jewish immigrant, came to the U. S. at the age of 2, was impressed early into an uncle's sweatshop on Delancey St. He

ran away as a youth to the less strenuous life of the Pennsylvania coal fields.

While the elder Freed was working as a clerk in a company store, he met his wife-to-be, who comes of sturdy Welsh Protestant mining stock. Freed was raised as a Baptist; his father still adheres to his own religion.

After living for a while in Oklahoma City and Alliance, Ohio, the family settled in Salem, Ohio, which since Freed's rise to fame has looked upon him as a native son. Freed's parents still live there.

Freed describes his childhood, as normal, although the family was far from affluent.

Freed showed some musical talent at an early age, and was

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introduced to the trombone. At the age of 12 or so, after seeing the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra on tour, he wanted to become a concert trombonist, but that ambition disappeared a few years later when, as Freed said, "I got the dance band bug."

In high school, Freed organized a band, named it the Sultans of Swing after a famous Harlem orchestra of that name, and played dance dates in Salem and its environs.

"We got 50 cents a man for an evening's work, and at that pay we couldn't afford orchestras. So we played blues or Dixieland, which are the easiest things to jam," Freed said.

"We spent most of our orchestra earnings and allowances traveling up to 200 miles on a Saturday night to hear a name band that was playing in the area, and many times I said to myself, 'Someday I'll have a dance band of my own.'"

Freed's musical ambitions waned later.

When it came Alan's turn to go to college, he enrolled in Ohio State for a course in journalism. This did not meet with Freed's father's approval.

"He had his heart set on his sons becoming doctors and lawyers," Alan recalls. "He never

thought of a newspaper man being a professional. So just to please him I switched to mechanical engineering. I hated every minute of it — I just couldn't make it.

"One day I peered through the window of the campus radio station and that was it — I was gone.

"I hung around waiting for a chance to announce or do anything, but nothing happened."

Freed said he mentioned his new-found radio ambitions to a speech prof, who gave him books to read and suggested that he practice talking by reading newspapers aloud.

## An 'Accidental' Disk Jockey

In 1941, after a year of college, Freed was drafted and assigned to Camp McCoy, Wis., as a Signal Corps photographer. After a few months' service, he came down with double mastoiditis. He was cured by the then-new sulfa drugs, but the infection left him with damaged hearing.

"There are certain sounds in music I still can't hear," he conceded, adding quickly: "But please don't say this is why I like rock and roll."

Out of the Army on a medical discharge in 1942, Freed got a job in Columbus as an ordnance inspector in a tank-track factory and attended Ohio State at night under an accelerated program which got him his degree in engineering in 1943.

In the last months of college, Freed, still infected with the radio virus, auditioned for stations for miles around and finally landed a \$17 a week job with WKST in New Castle, Pa. After graduation, Freed quit his inspector's job and went to work in radio, despite a hefty pay cut.

He stayed there for six months, a period which Freed calls the most important in his life. While at the station, he did everything from sweeping floors to writing his own continuity and acting as engineer for his shows.

Once, after auditioning for CBS in New York, he was told that his Midwest accent was too grating and that "if I had any other profession I should get out of the radio announcing business as soon as possible."

But Freed persisted and in 1945 landed a sports announcer job at WAKR in Akron, Ohio. Through an accident, he became a disk jockey.

"One night," Freed said, "as I finished the 11:10 sports broadcast I got a very quick call saying the disk jockey for the 11:15

show had not shown up. As I was the only announcer in the studio, I was elected.

"I grabbed a stack of records, any records, and the engineer in the control room told me which ones were popular. So I did the show. The next day the sponsor called up and said he liked the show. The owner of the station did, too, so he fired the other guy and gave me the job."

In 1950, Freed attempted to leave WAKR for a better job and wound up on a court fight over a clause in his contract with the station, which kept him from taking another radio job in the area for a year. The court upheld WAKR, so Freed quit radio and got a TV job on Cleveland's WXEL-TV. The clause in the WAKR contract did not cover TV.

Eighteen months later, Freed returned to radio, on WJW in Cleveland, at the urging of Leo Mintz, owner of Cleveland's largest record shop, who had noticed that "race" records — rhythm and blues — were beginning to get popular and believed that a R & B craze might be imminent.

### 'Rhythm and Blues' Becomes Rock 'n' Roll

Freed played only R & B records on his show, although he christened the style Rock and Roll to avoid the racial stigma of the old classification.

"It was more Leo's idea than mine," he said. "Only the other day he called me up and told me, 'I had the foresight and you're making all the money.'"

Early in the program, Freed developed his trademark—slamming out the beat with his hand. At first he whopped the table top, wearing a golf glove to protect his hand, until someone gave him the idea of using a telephone book, which was softer than wood.

When Freed was ending up his college course, he renewed an acquaintance with a girl he had known since grade-school days.

In 1944, when Freed was making \$42 a week at a Youngstown, Ohio, station, he and Betty Lou were married. They had two children, Alana, who is now 11, and Lance, who is 9.

As Freed's popularity built up in Akron, he found he was putting in 12- and 13-hour days promoting shows ranging from Spike Jones to cool jazz, and making personal appearances, in addition to his disk jockey chores.

"At that time," Freed says now, "my career had to come first, even before my family. Betty Lou wasn't built to stand the trials and tribulations that go with being married to a person in show business.

"We tried to make a go of it because of the children, but we became complete strangers. We agreed on a mutual divorce and were divorced in December, 1949.

"For a time, the whole world seemed to collapse, but what we did turned out to be the right thing."

The ex-Mrs. Freed and the children went to Florida, where Betty Lou's mother lived. Betty Lou has since remarried as has Freed. Despite the divorce, and remarriages, the families are quite close.

When Freed was doing the TV show in Cleveland, one of his sponsors was the local Arthur Murray dance studio, which was supervised by Jacqueline McCoy Hess, now 39, a divorcee. A farm girl from Coshocton, Ohio, she had two children, a daughter who is now Mrs. Tony Bruce, 19, of Brooklyn, and a son, Tommy, 18, who graduated this month from high school in Akron.

### Freed Almost Lost Career—and Life

As part of her dance studio duties, Jackie came in contact with Freed. "We were lonely people," Freed recalls. "We fell madly in love." They were married in Toledo late in 1950, and now have two children of their own, Sieglind 2, and Alan Jr., 1.

Freed's radio show over WJW, which was called the "Moondog Rock and Roll Party," caught on almost immediately. At first, it attracted an audience that was nearly all Negro, but as time went on more and more whites began to dig Rock and Roll.

In March, 1952, Freed decided to cash in on the success of Rock and Roll by staging a Moondog Ball in the Cleveland Arena, which has a capacity of 10,000. About 9,000 tickets were sold in advance, and the night of the ball 30,000 persons showed up, crashing the doors down and bowling over the outnumbered cops.

The show had to be called off, but it wasn't a financial loss. "Everybody had such a grand time breaking into the arena they didn't ask for their money back," Freed said.

Freed gave up the idea of staging dances in Cleveland, and instead ran eight reserved seat theater-type shows in the Arena and in the city's public auditorium. All were sellouts.

At the height of his popularity in Cleveland, Freed almost lost his career and his life, in the tangled wreckage of his auto. In April, 1953, he fell asleep while driving home after a late broadcast and his car smashed into a tree near his home in Shaker Heights, an exclusive Cleveland suburb.

"I had no face at all," Freed said. "The skin was hanging down in flaps. They took 260 stitches in it to patch me up, and later I had extensive plastic surgery that cost nearly \$12,000.

"For the first 10 days, I was not expected to live.

"Forty-eight hours after the accident my heart stopped beating and they injected adrenalin directly into the heart to get it beating. I can remember the doctors looking at my fingernails and shaking their heads."

Five weeks after the crash, Freed had recovered sufficiently to resume his Moondog broadcasts, lying flat on his back in his hospital bed. When he left the hospital after 16 weeks, he went home for three months of convalescence, and did his broadcasts from a chair beside his bed.

But as a concession to his healing insides, he temporarily gave up beating time on the phone book to the rowdy rock and roll beat.

**WEEK-END EDITION: Freed and the Record Business.**