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EXCLUSIVE: BEHIND THE SCENES
WITH GUNS N' ROSES ON TOUR

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SPECIAL ISSUE

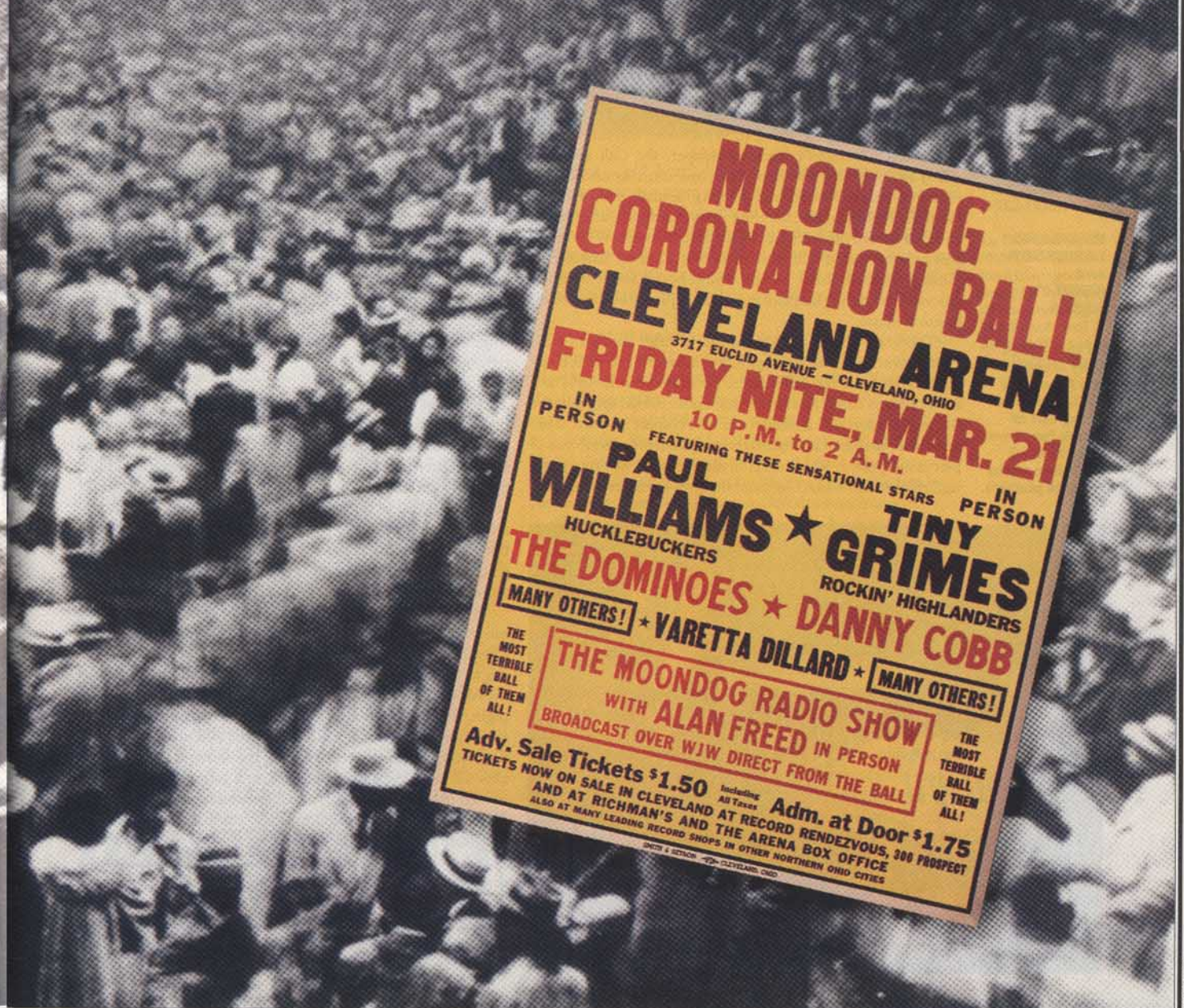
40 YEARS OF

**ROCK
&
ROLL**



On March 21, 1952, in Cleveland, Alan Freed emceed the first rock concert — and the thousands who came got all shook up **BY TOM JUNOD**

Oh, What A Night!



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

IN PERSON IN PERSON
FEATURING THESE SENSATIONAL STARS

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

THE DOMINOES ★ **DANNY COBB**
★ **VARETTA DILLARD** ★ **MANY OTHERS!**

THE MOONDOG RADIO SHOW
WITH **ALAN FREED** IN PERSON
BROADCAST OVER WJW DIRECT FROM THE BALL

THE MOST TERRIBLE BALL OF THEM ALL!
THE MOST TERRIBLE BALL OF THEM ALL!

Adv. Sale Tickets \$1.50 Including All Taxes Adm. at Door \$1.75
TICKETS NOW ON SALE IN CLEVELAND AT RECORD RENDEZVOUS, 300 PROSPECT
AND AT RICHMAN'S AND THE ARENA BOX OFFICE
ALSO AT MANY LEADING RECORD SHOPS IN OTHER NORTHERN OHIO CITIES

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SOMETHING DROVE THE KIDS CRAZY. WE KNOW THAT MUCH. BUT WHAT DID IT, WHAT MADE THEM SCREAM AND HOLLER AND STOMP AND SWAY AND SHUT THE PLACE DOWN? BECAUSE IT WASN'T JUST THE MUSIC—THE MUSIC WAS

already on the radio, already blaring from speakers hung outside record stores, already in the clubs and the ballrooms. Hell, if the music was enough to make people crazy, then everybody should have gone crazy a few days earlier when John Lee Hooker sang "Let Your Daddy Ride" at the Circle Theatre or when the Dominoes sang "Sixty Minute Man" at Gleason's or when the Orioles sang of love and tears at the Ebony Lounge. But they didn't. They didn't go crazy until Alan Freed threw his Moondog Coronation Ball at the Cleveland Arena and so made March 21, 1952, the first night of rock and roll.

Of course, Freed was crazy to start with, and so maybe he gets the credit or takes the blame. He was a divided man, caught between the impulses of visionary and mercenary, and a self-destructive man, who was convinced he would die young and drank as though to prove it. What better emissary for the music that Cleveland's black newspaper, the *Call and Post*, called an expression of "bum taste, low morality and downright gutbucket subversions"? The man actually *howled* on the radio. At 11:15 at night, after the news and sports, after Mom and Dad turned off the lights, he hit the airwaves at WJW like a renegade evangelist, selling sin instead of salvation, barking his message over choruses of strip-show horns and crap-game crooners, pounding his palm raw on a telephone book to bring home the beat.

The beat. Maybe that's what did it. After all, that's what Freed was selling, pushing, hyping, *preaching*; that's what he offered as a vehicle for deliverance. He started out in 1951 as a kind of hired hand, hawking black music for his sponsor, the Record Rendezvous, a store down on Prospect Avenue. If the store had purchased a particular record, then Freed's job was to play it and push it. Race music, rhythm records, hot jazz, jump jazz, rhythm and blues, blues and rhythm—no matter what peo-

ple called the music, he could sell it because he could sell *anything*. Somewhere along the line, though, he began to believe in the power of the beat. He began to understand. This was pleasure music; this was visceral music; this was music that didn't require one ounce of learning or cultivation. Freed played it, and the kids knew what to do with it. Forget the big bands—by the early '50s they were neutered and soulless. And forget jazz too—jazz was for eggheads and college students. This music—this black music, with the blue lyrics and the insinuating horns and the bawdy-house beat—was the music of the body, and the music of the body was only a short space from the music of the soul.

Freed called himself the Moondog—a creature of the night, baying in the darkness—and he called his show *The Moondog House*. He was not the only disc jockey in town playing this new sound. If it was just the music you wanted, you could listen to a show called *Rhythm Records* on WSRS. But if you wanted to be a Moondogger, you had to listen to Freed. He was white, his listeners were mostly black, and he was asking them—*pleading* with them, really—to come inside, to pledge their loyalty, to join his club. He needed them, he would say, and one day, in return for their fealty, he would throw them a party, a concert featuring a congregation of the artists he played on the radio, at Cleveland's biggest playroom, the Arena. There they would witness, at midnight, a coronation: Alan Freed would be crowned their king.

They had no idea how many people would come. Freed, Lew Platt (the actual promoter of the event) and the fellas down at the Record Rendezvous—how could they know? There were no computerized ticket outlets in 1952, no sophisticated polls of Freed's audience, no way to project how many kids would cough up \$1.50 to hear music that radio stations played only around midnight. There was just an enormous empty space—they had *hockey* games in the Cleveland Arena, the Globetrotters played there—and a bunch of guys wondering how in the world they would fill it.

It's not like they had an advertising budget or big-time promotional techniques at their disposal. All they had, in fact, were a few placards at the Record Rendezvous, a few salesmen willing to talk up the show to kids buying records—and they had the Moondog. They had the Moondog every minute of every night, for one month, two months, some people remember *three* months before the Ball. Every time you turned on *Moondog House*, there was Freed, hyping the show. It was his party, after all, and it was in his interest, says John Leniar, who answered phones for Freed as a teenager and is now editor of the *Call and Post*, "to play mind games . . . to make the Moondog Coronation Ball the place to be."

They printed, to start, around 7,000 tickets at a printer down the street from the Record Rendezvous. They sold them in a week. It was at this point that Leo Mintz, the store's owner, took a vacation and flew his family to Florida. Mintz had founded the Rendezvous in 1939, buying used jukebox records for a penny apiece and selling them for nickels and dimes.

ESTELENE LAWRENCE and SHIRLEY HAYES

As teenagers, they attended the Moondog Ball, and after being out of touch for years, they danced together again for this picture.



JOHN CHASSON/GAMMA LIAISON

He built the place into one of the biggest record stores in Cleveland, and he owed a good deal of his success to the upstart labels—like Chess, Savoy and King—that were peddling blues and R&B. Mintz was a prototype; like many of the businessmen who gave black music its first big kick, he was Jewish. He had no qualms about selling records that a lot of white people considered salacious junk. He could sell anything, just like Freed. Now, however, he was away in Florida, and his brother-in-law Milton Kulkin decided to act in Leo's spirit and see how many more tickets he could sell to the Moondog Coronation Ball.

Well, why not? This was the Arena, right? The Globetrotters played there, right? So Kulkin (called Uncle Miltie by Freed and habitués of the Rendezvous) went to the printer and asked him to run off another 2,000 tickets or so. That would do it. But that didn't do it, not quite, because Platt was down in Akron, and he was printing more tickets to sell at the door. So nobody knew how many tickets there actually were. Then Kulkin's second run sold out in a *day*, and he called Mintz in Florida and told him to fly home, something historic was about to happen in Cleveland, Ohio.

They all ate steak that night—Alan Freed and his wife and his brother David and the WJW station manager—at a restaurant across the street from the Arena and congratulated themselves. They had sold out the Arena! The biggest hall in town, and you couldn't buy a ticket!

March 21, 1952. A cloudy Friday night in Cleveland, touched with sprays of rain. A night like a thousand other nights. But already there were rumblings: sex and fear and violence and the yearning for release, for ecstasy—all the ingredients of rock and roll—were turning up in the newspapers, even in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, a prim Republican daily. "The Reds," agents of the communist menace, appeared in 21 *Plain Dealer* headlines in a single day that week. There were also stories about juvenile delinquents trashing churches and vandalizing homes, just for the thrill of it, and there was a story that said 568 Cleveland teenagers had contracted VD in 1951. If you listened closely, you could hear the beat, the beat of a culture remaking itself. But most people didn't bother, not even Alan Freed, who had just eaten a nice dinner and "looked forward," in the words of his brother, "to a nice evening."

But Uncle Miltie was listening. He claims he even saved a ticket, as a keepsake. He didn't eat steak, though. He worked. He went back and forth from the Arena box office to the front door, and later, when he thought things were going smoothly, he went outside and looked down Euclid Avenue and saw the future. He remembers seeing them "shoulder to shoulder" on the pavement, spread all the way across the avenue, across both lanes of traffic, everywhere, as far as he could see. Moondoggers! Thousands of them! Coming to the Arena!

"They were not unruly," Kulkin says. Indeed, it was as if they were gathered together for some higher purpose. And four decades later, when Kulkin tried to describe what he saw that night, he recalled the early civil rights marches, the images of men and women marching to some distant music, music

DANCING IN THE STREET. IN 1952 IN CLEVELAND, KIDS LIKE SHIRLEY HAYES COULDN'T GO TO CLUBS OR BARS BECAUSE THEY WERE UNDERAGE, AND WHEN THEY WENT TO HOPS AND DANCES THEY USUALLY HAD TO MOVE TO MUSIC THAT



PAUL "HUCKLEBUCK" WILLIAMS

In the '50s and '60s, Williams and his band backed up many of the leading R&B and soul acts at Harlem's Apollo Theatre.

only they could hear, and not a white face among them. Years later historians would say that rock and roll became rock and roll when Alan Freed delivered the black beat to white teenagers. But that night in Cleveland, when Milton Kulkin looked down Euclid Avenue to see who was on hand for the first-ever rock and roll concert, the faces were all black faces. "Don't you see?" Kulkin says. "It was beautiful."

Nobody called it rock and roll back then, and of course only white people called it race music. If you were black, you called it black music, and sometimes you called it R&B. You played it at parties, you played it at dances, and you played it in your living room if your parents weren't so strict they made you listen to spirituals. You played it while you washed dishes, you played it while you learned to kiss, and then when the radio started broadcasting it late at night, you played it when your parents were asleep—and you were left alone to dream.

Shirley Hayes was 18 in 1951, and oh, how she dreamed. And the wild man on WJW helped her along. In the enchanted world of radio, it didn't matter if the Moondog was black or white: When he came on, people danced, and dancing was how Shirley liked to dream. It just came so easy, the movement, the swing, when Moondog played the Dominoes and Stick McGhee and Joe Turner and Wynonie Harris and Chicken Shack Milburn and Hucklebuck Williams and whatever else Leo Mintz gave him. Many historians have traced the line of rock and roll back to the blues, back to the Mississippi Delta, back to the old slave shouters, but Shirley Hayes remembers the blues as "old man's music," sad and defeated. The music *she* listened to, Moondog music, was full of life, of youth and desire, and when people heard it playing out an open window, they'd start dancing in the street. That was the problem, though:

was dusty and old-fashioned. They were just teenagers, after all, black teenagers, and nobody thought of them as a market worth exploiting. Then, suddenly, this Alan Freed started talking about a dance at the Arena, and he tapped into something nobody else had ever bothered to target: not only the power of blacks and black music but also the power of teen. A dance at the Arena, with singers you heard on the radio? There had never been anything like it or even anything close, and, says Shirley Hayes, "If you were anybody, you just had to go."

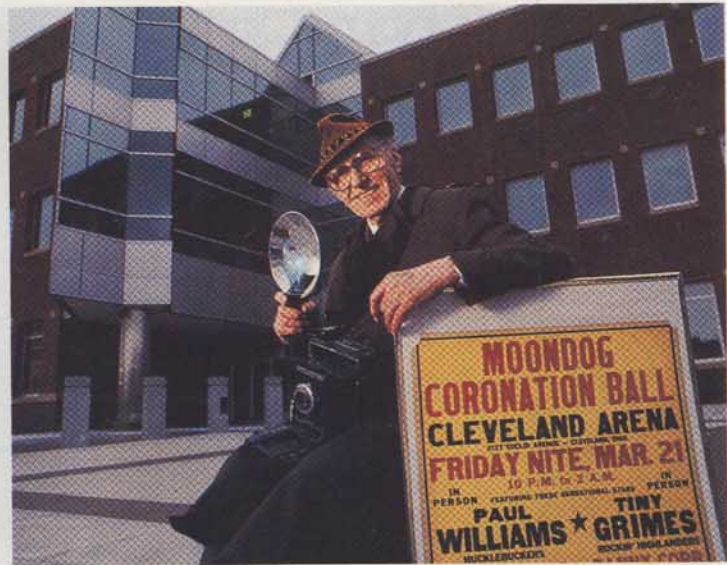
So they came. By foot. By bicycle. By streetcar and by bus. They came from beyond Cleveland, too, from Akron, from Canton, from all over the industrial north of Ohio, many of them the children of the great black northern migration, just a generation removed from the farm, from Mississippi and Arkansas and Louisiana and the holy hell of the rural South, gathered now for the biggest party in the history of Cleveland.

Shirley Hayes came early because she lived near the Arena and she wanted room to dance. She sat on the railing between the floor and the bleachers and watched the place fill up with her fellow Moondoggers. She remembers even now how happy she felt, how sweet the world looked with the Moondog onstage, the master of ceremonies, talking his crazy talk. She never lost that feeling of happiness, not even when the crowd surged and she fell from the railing and her boyfriend swept in and caught her—like magic—before her head hit the ground; not even when she left the dance to hang out in the lobby, and the front doors of the Arena burst open and a surging mob poured through the breach, and the first person Shirley saw—like magic—was her good friend Estelene Lawrence.

Estelene had been waiting in line, clutching her ticket, and when the crowd began its push, she was pressed against the doors, terrified. She watched the doors begin to move—to buckle and shake, to rock, like a pair of snaky hips—and she thought, "They're gonna go." And then they did: bam! bam! bam! bam! One after another, steel doors crashing to the ground, glass doors exploding. The crowd rushed forward, carrying Estelene aloft, and she moved as though on a magic carpet, right over the doors, right through the lobby, right into the hall where the lights were low and the music was just a roar and the people were already dancing. And then she began to laugh. There were no police. The white men who usually worked the Arena—union guys in homburg hats and tuxedos—were gone. Only they were there, the boys in their suede shoes, the girls in their long skirts and Billie Holiday hairdos, the hooligans with their bottles of liquor and their reefer. The place was like a carnival, where "it was like anything could happen," in Estelene's words. Maybe rock and roll was born at that very moment, when Estelene Lawrence looked around the room and laughed in terror and exultation at the lifting of restraints, the sheer license inherent in this music, and realized that anything was possible, anything at all.

The fights began when Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams was onstage, and Hucklebuck played right on through them. He knew better than to stop. He had played his horn in nightclubs,

WHO PLAYED IN KILTS AND FEATURED SCREAMIN' JAY HAWKINS ON PIANO. JUST HUCKLEBUCK. AND WHEN THAT MARSHAL TOOK THE STAGE AND SHUT HIM DOWN, HE WAS HAPPY "TO GET OUT OF THERE ALIVE," BECAUSE WITHOUT THE



PETER HASTINGS

The man who took the only pictures of the Moondog Ball poses at the site of the Cleveland Arena, which was torn down in 1977.

barrooms, roadhouses, after-hours joints and chicken shacks, and he had witnessed all kinds of unruliness. "I've seen people get killed every way you can imagine," Hucklebuck says. "Knives, guns, hammers, baseball bats—every way a person can die, I've just about seen it. And there's only one thing you can do, and that's keep on playing."

Hucklebuck was no visionary, no comet flaring across the early firmament of rock and roll. Like many of the musicians who first profited from the beat, he had simply put in his time, playing the alto in swing bands in the early '40s and then the baritone when the head of Savoy Records told him that's what kids wanted to hear these days—a great big honkin' tonkin' sound. He had his first hits with the baritone in the late '40s—"Thirty-Five Thirty" and "Hucklebuck"—and by the time he got to the Moondog Coronation Ball, he was an expert honker. And as Hucklebuck tells the story, the Cleveland Arena just wasn't big enough for his brand of agitation. "We was romping and swinging, and the people outside the doors heard that good music and whoa! The doors came down. That's how they came in. Broke 'em down."

Oh, Lord, how they poured into the hall, and soon the crowd began to move in enormous rhythmic waves, back and forth, then in a mad swirl. And then a fight started, and another, and another. Way up in the balcony, Hucklebuck saw an old man and a young man clinched in a weird dance. "The young fella was hitting the old one, and every time he hit him, the old man would stick him with a knife, somewhere in the butt. And then he stuck him one last time and that was it: Young one went down." Yes, Hucklebuck could see everything, but he kept honking until the fire marshal came in and pulled the plug. No other act got the chance to play—not Varetta Dillard or the Dominoes or Tiny Grimes and the rockin' Highlanders,

MUSIC THERE WAS NOTHING BETWEEN HIM AND THE CROWD OR BETWEEN THE CROWD AND AN ALL-OUT RIOT. THERE WAS ONLY ONE STABBING REPORTED THAT NIGHT, AND THERE WERE NO FATALITIES. BUT NO MATTER WHERE THEY

were sitting, no matter where they were dancing, people remember hearing rumors of violence and the sound of fear.

Marjorie Johnson, who snuck out of her house to go to the Moondog, heard people screaming that a man had been stabbed. She was so scared ("I stepped into hell, that's what I thought") she ran home crying to her mama, who gave her a whipping anyway. Peter Hastings, the white photographer who had been hired by Leo Mintz's public relations agency to shoot the show, realized that "something was going terribly, terribly wrong." He pressed his shutter exactly twice, and then, realizing that the pictures were too newsworthy for public relations, sold out his employer and hawked the only live action shots of the Moondog Coronation Ball to the Cleveland Press, the city's afternoon newspaper. The photos framed practically the entire Arena, and they capture forever the crowded stage and, on the floor, the mad, riotous swirl.

There are no white faces evident in the picture. The few whites who had anything to do with the Moondog Coronation Ball left, for the most part, at the first hint of anarchy. Hastings fled as soon as he clicked off two frames. Anne Bassett, the woman who hired him, never went inside; she went instead across the street, to the restaurant where Freed had eaten his steak dinner, and behind locked doors watched the black crowd outside. David Freed took refuge in the press box. So did Alan Freed's wife, Jackie, and her teenage daughter, Toni Bruce, who still remembers how the Moondoggers protected her. And so, eventually, did Freed, after people stormed the stage, and all the rigging that supported the big glittery sign saying Moondoggers came down with a crash.

"Freed left me all by myself, and I never forgave him," says Walter Scholz, who worked for Freed and WJW as an engineer. One moment Scholz was onstage with the Moondog,

and the next he was all alone, a white man surrounded for the first time in his life by black people.

A boy climbed the stage, Scholz says, and then walked out across the sea of bobbing heads, placing his feet right on the hats and the hairdos, until finally he fell and a crowd of women set upon him with their high heels. Men brandished knives, he says, and cut the electrical lines to the stage. And when one of Scholz's colleagues climbed up on the girders and lowered a rope to the stage to get Scholz the hell out of there, the men with the knives cut the rope too! Then they surrounded him, and God knows what would have happened if Scholz hadn't reached into a box and given them free records. Anything could have happened; nothing would have surprised poor Walter Scholz—because he "looked down among all those faces and they were just glowing," and he couldn't help wondering what the world, his world, the world of a middle-aged white man, was coming to.

Shirley Hayes and Estelene Lawrence talked about the Moondog Ball for years. And although they are both 59, they still love the music and still love to dance. Marjorie Johnson, now 55, never went to another concert—"I was cured," she says. Hucklebuck Williams is long retired and Leo Mintz long dead. Milt Kulkin retired from the Record Rendezvous in 1979 after working there 40 years. David Freed practices law. Peter Hastings became the official photographer of the Cleveland Orchestra, and although he despises rock music, he knows he is doomed to be remembered as the man who took the only pictures of the first rock concert. Walter Scholz, 85, lives in Florida and still wonders what the world is coming to.

As for Alan Freed, well, the Moondog kept howling, that's for sure. He left Cleveland two years after the Moondog Coronation Ball and went to New York's WINS. There he finally broke the music to a white audience and took credit for coining the words "rock and roll," though others have made the same claim, and the phrase had been bouncing around for years. It was also in New York that he eventually got involved in the payola scandals.

By then Freed was working for WABC, which fired him in 1959. Three years later he pleaded guilty to commercial bribery and received a suspended sentence. In 1965 he died of kidney disease, a drunk, nearly destitute—and young, as he had prophesied. He was 42 years old.

The beat did not die with him, of course. The beat became rock and roll, and rock and roll became the sound of the culture. A music that was commercial and innocent and inherently democratic—a music of absolute license, a music that told us anything was possible—became the most American of art forms, and Americans have alternately loved it and hated it for 40 years. The thing is, when people really hate it—when they ask why the music has to be so violent and chaotic, so disturbing—you can always look back at the Moondog Coronation Ball in Cleveland and answer, with a shrug and a smile, "Well, sir, it was just born that way." ●

DAVID FREED

He could have followed his brother Alan to New York but decided to quit the music business and study law.

