

# Jingle Jangle

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**AMERICAN BANDSTAND**  
**Dick Clark and the Making**  
**of a Rock 'n' Roll Empire**  
By John A. Jackson

Oxford University Press: 336 pp., \$27.50

Rock fans have always separated the authentic from the phony. If the young Elvis personified the authentic rebel in early rock 'n' roll, Dick Clark exemplified the schlockmeister. The heyday of Clark and his Philadelphia-based TV show "American Bandstand" came from 1959 to 1963, when authentic rock 'n' roll almost died—when Elvis went into the Army, Chuck Berry went to jail, Buddy Holly went down in a plane crash and Jerry Lee Lewis went out and married his 14-year-old cousin Myra, which got him banned from the airwaves. After that, and before the Beatles rescued rock, a lot of lousy records made it into the Top 10. The worst came from Philadelphia. Fabian, Frankie Avalon and Bobby Rydell—local boys with little talent—became teen idols, largely because of Dick Clark's energy and savvy.

John A. Jackson's fascinating book shows how Clark worked the biz side of pop music to become a multimillionaire and how his show fit into 1950s American culture and society. Jackson illuminates the ways the civil rights movement raised issues that extended into pop music and how public anxiety about interracial dancing set limits on what a TV show like Clark's could do.

Clark was born in 1929 in Bronxville, a prosperous New York suburb, and graduated from Syracuse University in 1951. He's so closely identified with "American Bandstand" that it's surprising to learn he didn't invent the format in which local teenagers danced while guest stars lip-synced to their current hits. He didn't even start the show. When he took it over, he wasn't much of a rock 'n' roller. He had been a deejay playing big-band pop and "didn't know Chuck Berry from a huckleberry," in the words of one contemporary. But his image as a squeaky clean, happily married family man was just what TV needed; his predecessor was dismissed when execs learned he would be charged with 20 counts of statutory rape involving a 13-year-old girl on the show.

The early rock 'n' roll audience threatened deep-seated taboos against interracial contact. Before Dick Clark got a network show, ABC gave rock's first great deejay, Alan Freed, a slot in 1957. Freed had promoted live shows in which blacks and whites danced together in the aisles, creating anxiety in some circles. On Freed's third show, black singer Frankie Lymon, who had been lip-syncing his hit "Why Must I Be a Teenager in Love," was shown by the cameras dancing with a white girl. ABC's Southern affiliates went berserk, and the national sponsors insisted that the network kill the show, which it did. A week later, "American Bandstand" made its debut on national TV, and Clark had learned an important lesson about '50s America: No interracial dancing on TV.

At the same time, the nascent civil rights movement made it clear that dance shows like "American Bandstand" could not be segregated. The key battle on this front was fought not in Philadelphia but in Baltimore, where the local equivalent of Dick Clark's "American Bandstand" was the "Buddy Deane Show." The kids on the Deane show were white—except for one day a month when they were black. This segregation brought protests from the NAACP. Deane

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**Chubby Checker demonstrating the Twist, 1961; from "The End of Innocence," edited by Liz Jobey (Scolo: 268 pp., \$39.95)**

didn't get it. He offered to reserve three days a week for blacks. Because of continuing protests, the station took the show off the air. Clark learned a second lesson: You couldn't show interracial dancing, but you couldn't ban blacks from the audience either.

Nevertheless, for several years the cameras on "American Bandstand" rarely showed blacks in the audience or dancing. Clark established a system of "regulars" that effectively kept black young people out of the studio without an official policy of segregation. Not until the mid-'60s did Clark really integrate the show.

The regulars were almost all working-class Italian American high school kids. Their close proximity to Philadelphia's black community, Jackson shows, was one of the keys to the success of "American Bandstand." Italian American kids "seemed to have a natural sense of rhythm and an inborn musical ability," according to Ed Ward in "The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock 'n' Roll." Especially in New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia, they were the "one ethnic group that knew anything about rock and roll." At a time when suburbanization was moving the white middle class out of the city, working-class Italians were left behind in close proximity to black neighborhoods. When the kids on "American Bandstand" brought new dances into the studio, they were dances they had learned from Philadelphia's blacks. The swim, the Watusi, the pony, the stroll and the greatest dance craze of all time, the twist, all were taught on "American Bandstand," and all originated in Philadelphia's black communities.

"Bandstand," Jackson argues, made those black dances acceptable to white society. The key to such acceptability was eliminating the fluid hip movement of the dance and finding acceptably innocuous performers. The twist, for example, was originally a Hank Ballard song, but Ballard had a reputation for double-entendre lyrics and a risqué live show. So Clark had an associate in the biz rewrite the song and recruit somebody new to sing it. Ernest Evans, an 18-year-old

African American who worked in a poultry market, had been begging for a recording contract, he seemed "cuddly and telegenic," so he got the shot. They gave him a new name, Chubby Checker, a play on Fats Domino, put him on "American Bandstand" in September 1960, and the rest is history.

Dick Clark avoided the problems of sex and race, but money almost brought him down. Payola, they called it, the practice by which promoters paid deejays to play their records. Clark had never been a rock 'n' roll rebel; he was always a boy businessman. Jackson examines Clark's sharp business practices. Of course Clark was hardly alone; Phil Spector once explained that, in Philadelphia, the music biz "existed for nothing but hype. They existed to pull strokes, conjure deals out of nowhere, juggle hits off nothing. Money was a lot of it, of course, but there was something else as well, a real glee involved; a purist's love of hustle for its own sake."

Clark's various hustles became the focus of a congressional investigation into payola. Payola wasn't illegal and indeed was considered a way of life in the record business. But the assumption behind the payola investigations was that kids wouldn't listen to rock 'n' roll if the deejays weren't paid to play it.

Clark was fighting for his professional life when he appeared in 1960 before the House Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight, which had recently exposed cheating on network TV quiz shows. His defense, Jackson shows, provided a case study in the wonderful world of statistics. Clark had hired a statistician, who presented confusing figures purporting to show that Clark was playing records because the kids wanted to hear them, not because he stood to make money.

Then Clark appeared in person to give what Jackson calls "the performance of a lifetime." He explained that, since payola had become an issue, he had given up whole or part interest in 33 industry-related businesses. Yes, he had profited from his investments. For example, the \$125 he invested in Jamie Records eventually earned

him \$11,900. Yes, he owned the rights to 160 songs, 143 of which had been given to him, but he denied ever plugging any of them "consciously." Yes, Jamie Records had spent \$15,000 on payola, but he had never accepted any payola himself.

Jackson claims that what he calls Clark's "furtive" ownership of the records he plugged on his show was "most definitely a deceptive conflict of interest." It's too bad the congressmen didn't have this book's appendix, showing the hits in which Dick Clark had a financial interest: "At the Hop" by Danny and the Juniors was a No. 1 song in 1958; Clark owned the publishing rights and played it on "American Bandstand" 51 times. "Sixteen Candles" by the Crests was No. 3 in 1958; the records were pressed at a company owned by Clark, who played it on "American Bandstand" 35 times. There are lots more on the list.

Of course, it didn't always work. Clark played records he owned that failed to become hits. Nevertheless Jackson contends that records produced by the three labels in which Clark had an interest got far more play on "American Bandstand" than records from other labels. The issue was "not that he could create a hit any time he wanted, but rather that he was able to give unparalleled exposure to any records he chose—including his own." Nevertheless, at the end of the hearings, former Rep. Oren Harris (D-Ark.) called Clark a "fine young man," and his payola troubles were over.

Freed took the other route: He refused to testify about payola and was fired from his job. But that wasn't the end of it. He pleaded guilty in 1962 to two counts of commercial bribery and got a suspended sentence. Then in 1964, the IRS went after him for unreported income. Before he could answer the charges, he was hospitalized; he died three weeks later at 43 of uremia.

If Dick Clark hadn't understood early rock 'n' roll, he really didn't get what happened next. During the summer of 1963, he heard the song "She Loves You" by a new British group and saw a picture of their long hair. He told a colleague: "It'll never fly." When their manager, Brian Epstein, signed the lads from Liverpool to perform on "The Ed Sullivan Show," a colleague of Dick Clark's told Epstein, "Oh my God, you blew it. Ed Sullivan is s---! Dick Clark is the game!" But 703 million people watched the Beatles on "Ed Sullivan," marking the rebirth of rock and the beginning of the slow decline of "American Bandstand." Dick Clark was retooled in the 1970s as a TV game show host, in the 1980s as an oldies impresario and, in the 1990s, as a spokesman for American Family Publishers sweepstakes, which sends his picture to tens of millions of people annually. In 1989, Clark finally left the show, and six months later, it went off the air after 37 consecutive years of broadcasting.

Jackson has done massive and well-documented research. His bibliography fills nine pages, and he interviewed more than 50 people for the book, including one of the Three Chuckles, one of the Four Jays and one of the Five Satins, along with Duane Eddy, the twangy guitarist who sold 200 million records during the 1950s after repeated exposure on "American Bandstand." (Eddy told Jackson, "I thought Dick was just lookin' after my career. I didn't realize he owned a part of it.")

Dick Clark appeared on the Forbes 400 list of the wealthiest Americans in 1986 and today is worth nearly \$200 million. The Philadelphia TV studio from which "American Bandstand" was broadcast has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. John Jackson's book tells a great American story and does it with impressive skill and intelligence. ■