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Roll Over, Beethoven

How Dick Clark taught American parents not to be afraid of rock-and-roll and made a fortune in the process.

AMERICAN BANDSTAND

*Dick Clark and the Making
of a Rock 'n' Roll Empire.*

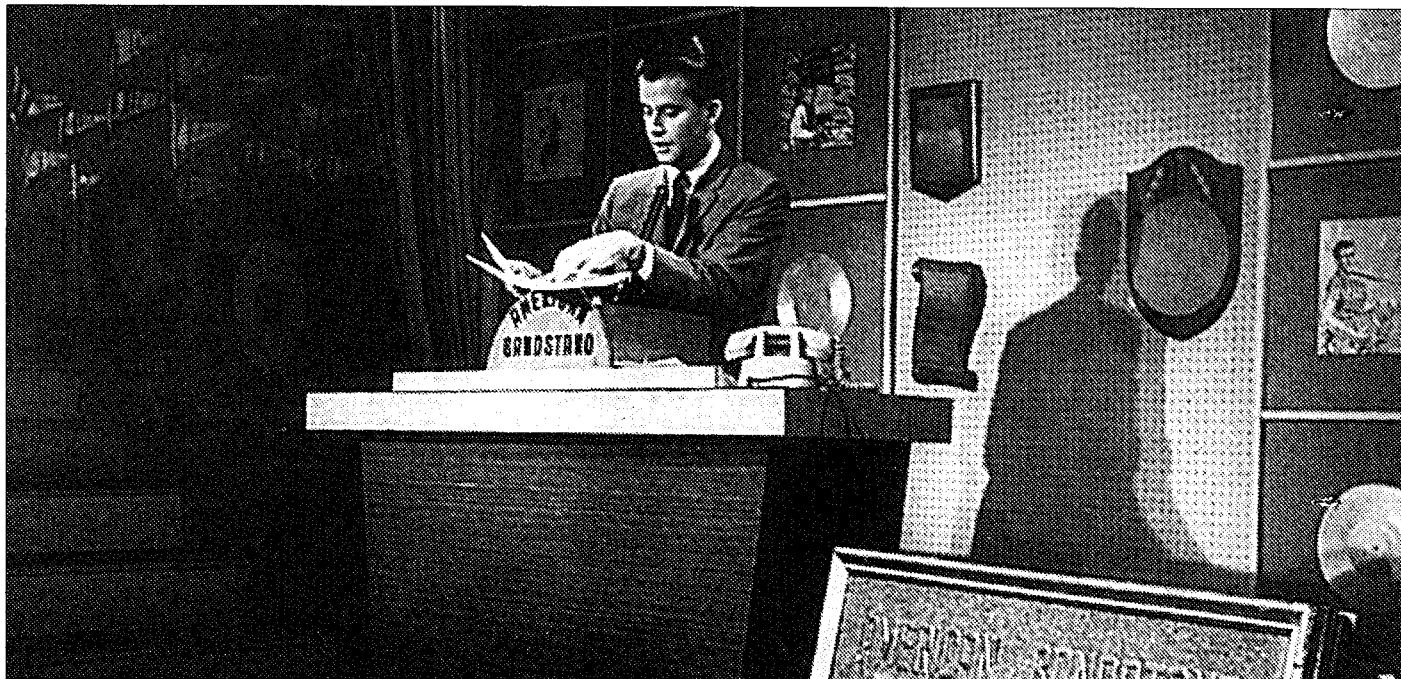
By John A. Jackson.

Illustrated. 336 pp. New York:

Oxford University Press. \$27.50.

By Fred Goodman

ON Oct. 6, 1952, television station WFIL in Philadelphia started its daily afternoon dance program, "Bandstand," about as unlikely a candidate to become a cultural institution as one could imagine. But it would be a remarkable 37 years before the final incarnation of the show — a badly shopworn and unforgivably irrelevant version named "The New American Bandstand" — gave up the ghost. Between those two points stood the glory days of "American Bandstand" as the most significant and successful television program catering to teen-agers, the single greatest showcase for the budding rock-and-roll record business and a badly needed



URBAN ARCHIVES, TEMPLE UNIVERSITY/FROM "AMERICAN BANDSTAND"

Dick Clark rehearsing in November 1959, just days after ABC told him to drop his music-related businesses or stop serving as host of "American Bandstand."

building block for the fledgling ABC television network. As John A. Jackson's evenhanded and carefully researched "American Bandstand: Dick Clark and the Making of a Rock 'n' Roll Empire" ably illustrates, the program became a cultural mainstay because the bland facade of its ageless host and tireless advocate, Dick Clark, masked a cunning business mind and a well of ambition deep even by the standards of the entertainment industry.

Jackson previously wrote "Big Beat Heat," a biography of Alan Freed, the pioneering rock-and-roll disk jockey who was destroyed by the payola investigations of the late 1950's and early 60's. His new book recounts the flip side of that story. Like Freed, Clark was a target of a special subcommittee in the House of Representatives investigating payola, which called him to testify in April 1960. Unlike Freed, who freely admitted that payola was a way of life in the record business and that he had engaged in it, Clark proved a slippery witness and steadfastly maintained he had never engaged in payola despite taking many, many gifts from record companies — including enough valuable song copyrights to stock a significant music publishing company. When the smoke cleared, Freed, rock-and-roll's most daring and influential advocate in an era when the music was still largely dominated by black performers and viewed with alarm by many adults, was finished. Clark, whose advocacy of white teen idols like Fabian, Frankie Avalon and Paul Anka helped cement the im-

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pression that he was interested in plying a somewhat tamer and less threatening product, was just getting started. In 1986 he made Forbes list of the 400 wealthiest Americans, and by the mid-90's his Dick Clark Productions boasted 500 employees.

Despite quick success as a superb radio pitchman, Clark, whose father was an executive for a radio station in Utica, N.Y., was always more interested in succeeding in the business end than as a personality. Clearly, he was a rarity in that he saw stardom and celebrity as a means to establishing himself as a force in the business, not as an end in itself. Working as a radio announcer in Philadelphia, the clean-cut 26-year-old Clark was tapped in 1956 to be the host of the successful daily local television teen-age record hop, "Bandstand," when its original host was dismissed.

The wholesome Clark did more than rehabilitate the program's image in Philadelphia: a year later he persuaded ABC, then a distant third to CBS and NBC, to gamble on the show. In August, 1957, a 90-minute version of the show — renamed "American Bandstand" — made its national debut on ABC and was an instant success. Although Clark had to beg for his network shot, he quickly became a valuable commodity to ABC, giving them their first leg up on daily afternoon programming. The following year Clark was rewarded with his own Saturday night show, which also proved an immediate hit.

While the hard-working Clark made "American Bandstand" a nationwide hit, the show more than repaid him with opportunity. When success came, Clark was ready — perhaps all too ready. He

proved a master at turning the programs and the power they had to make or break records and recording careers into deals that enriched him personally, like interests in record labels, distribution companies, pressing plants, music publishing companies, artist management and a beverage bottling company. His all-American-boy image notwithstanding, Clark had so many angles he was round.

UNTIL the payola scandal broke in 1959, Clark had been careful to keep his dealings low key and generally out of the public eye. One of Jackson's best feats is to lay those machinations squarely in front of the reader: he is fair but relentless in tracking the growth of Clark's music and television holdings, and leaves no doubt that Clark was a shrewd businessman who had little in common with the bland boy-next-door persona he projected over the air. And while openly skeptical of Clark's protestations that his business holdings and friendships did not affect programming decisions, Jackson does not ignore Clark's charm and skill as a businessman. It is particularly revealing that Duane Eddy, a guitarist who appeared frequently on "American Bandstand," did not initially realize that Clark had a piece of his management and that the two men remained lifelong friends — with Clark naming his second son Duane — even after Eddy concluded that Clark had sometimes shortchanged him. Similarly, while showing that Clark played it safe by moving more slowly to integrate the program's audience than he liked to claim, Jackson makes it clear that Clark did not discriminate against black performers and took a mildly progressive stance with

his own touring concert show when it would have been easier to play along with the Jim Crow rules that prevailed on much of the American concert circuit.

The book peaks with Clark's appearance before the House subcommittee. Although forced to divest himself of his broad music industry holdings — a move that cost Clark millions — he proved unrepentant and up to the task of defending himself before a powerful and often antagonistic Congressional hearing. In its aftermath, Clark rebuilt his holdings, this time into a far more successful television production empire.

"American Bandstand" persuasively makes the case that Clark was one of rock's true kingmakers in the 1950's and 60's. Ultimately, however, the show's longevity proved more an oddity than an indicator of continuing influence. By the time disco came along in the 1970's to save Clark's dance program from underground rock, the show — and the country — had changed dramatically, and "American Bandstand" was an artifact rather than a trendsetter. The story of how the show hung on for a few more years is not as interesting as the history of what came before. Nor does Jackson describe Clark's subsequent emergence as a major supplier of television and radio programming as effectively as he does his "Bandstand" rise.

In the end, however, "American Bandstand" does a good job with an elusive subject. A hustler and a world-class salesman, Clark, by design, made himself a cipher — bland, cheery, inoffensive and unrevealing. And if Jackson never comes right out and says it, that kind of deception made Dick Clark an apt embodiment of his era. □