



Forty Years That Shaped the Sound of America

A Gavin History of Radio  
Since the Birth of Rock & Roll

# Table of Contents

## PART ONE: THE EVE

*The magic of radio; the challenge of television; the stirrings of a revolution.*

### 10 **Your Hit Parade: Radio On the Eve of Rock and Roll**

*By Gerald Nachman*

Long before Casey Kasem, radio had countdown shows. Here's how music sounded on the radio in the Thirties and Forties.

### 13 **Enter Television**

*By Pete Fornatale and Josh Mills*

The authors recount the growth of television after World War II. Radio was said to be dying. Here's why it never did.

### 16 **Growing Up With Alan Freed**

*By Roger Steffens*



Alan Freed

A devoted fan listened nightly as Alan Freed, King of the Moonloggers, brought rock and roll radio from Cleveland to New York City.

## PART TWO: THE TOP 40

*On the air and behind the scenes with Top 40's pioneers, programmers and performers.*

### 24 **A Lucky Man: The Bill Gavin Story**

*By Bob Hamilton*

The veteran radio consultant and publisher conducts an intimate and insightful interview with Bill Gavin.



Bill Gavin

### 26 **From 'Dance Time' to Boss Radio:**

### **The Common Thread Was Gavin**

*By Ron Jacobs*

As a young program director at a Honolulu radio station, Jacobs found himself working with Bill Gavin and found a mentor for life.

### 28 **Radio Heaven**

*By Kim Fowley*

Kim Fowley, a rock artist, producer, and songwriter, traces his musical education to a favorite radio show: Bill Gavin's *Lucky Lager Dance Time*.

### 29 **A Typical Chat**

*By Pat O'Day*

The Pacific Northwest's most successful DJ and programmer, Pat O'Day of KJR in Seattle, recounts an everyday phone call with Gavin.

# Growing Up With Alan Freed



By Roger Steffens

It's early fall, 1954, and I'm 12 years old and miserable. In bed with a heavy cold, I turn to the radio for sustenance, spinning the dial listening for something more compelling than Teresa Brewer and Vaughn Monroe. It's a big 1948 beige Bendix table model with a light-up dial and brown knobs, and I have to hide it under the covers late at night, with the sound all the way down, so my parents will think I'm asleep.

Suddenly, my searching is arrested by an ear-splitting howl, an upscaling bloodhound wail, counterpointed by a deep baritone voice blaring "Ho! Ho! Ho!" over an insistent bluesy beat.

What the hell is this?

It is, in fact, the night I discover the King of the Moondoggers, the King of Rock and Roll himself, DJ Alan Freed. Manic, engaged, singing along with Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters, or B.B. "Blues Boy" King, beating a phone book and ringing a cowbell to frenetic sax instrumentals by Syl Austin, Sam "The Man" Taylor and Big Al Sears—Freed is unlike anyone I've ever heard in my young suburban New Jersey life.

In short order, my life begins to revolve around Freed's twice nightly broadcasts over WINS in New York. He's on for the kids from 7 to 9 p.m., then again on an all-request show for the older hipsters from 11 to 1 a.m. He opens the door to another universe coexisting in the shadows of the laundered life of the '50s, the soul-satisfying black musical experience. My parents think I've

lost my mind when I tell them that when I grow up I want to be Alan Freed.

How utterly irresistible is the *Rock 'n' Roll Dance Party* with Freed at its nightly helm, inviting us all into his "rock 'n' roll kingdom," a mythic place where we discover a nascent fellowship of youngsters who might as well be from another planet, as far as our elders are concerned. In our shared awakening can be found the seeds of the '60s civil rights movement.

I soon discover that others in my sixth grade class have found Freed too, and we begin to compare our reactions to the latest releases by the Charms, the Moonglows, the Nutmegs, the Five Satins, the Three Chuckles, the Robins, Nolan Strong and the Diablos. I drop out of Little League because Freed's late Saturday morning top 25 rock and roll hits show is broadcast the same time as our games. It's my first conscious preference of art over athletics.

Within weeks, Freed is the biggest thing



Author Steffens saved newspaper articles about his hero.

in the history of New York radio. Three stations change their formats to rock and roll, hoping to cash in on what is widely perceived as "just a fad." But we kids know different, and Freed is the uncle we all wish we had, the older person who really understands us. He reads dedications from "the kids in the projects" and talks constantly about his wife "Jackie and all the little Freeds," as if we were all family.

In late 1957, I tell my mother I'm going to take a bus to Hackensack to see a movie. She's forbidden me to attend any of Freed's wildly controversial live shows because she's certain that I'll be mugged. I hop a bus to the city, where I keep a secret rendezvous in the Port Authority Bus Terminal with several classmates. We rush excitedly over to Times Square to join a three block-long line around the Times Square Paramount Theater where Freed is presenting his *Christmas Jubilee of Stars*—Fats Domino, Buddy Holly & the Crickets, Jerry Lee Lewis, the teenage Everly Brothers—16 acts in all, plus a movie, for \$2.50.

The following summer, we begin to hang out at WINS, hoping to catch a glimpse of Freed, and we often encounter him on the street. He is abruptly gracious, and signs autographs for us. Every time I see him, he is carrying several 45s in his hand, and I begin to think of it as his trademark. We speak of the slugging of rock and roll by Walter Winchell and Frank Sinatra, who have painted our music as a tool of the Communists—

or the devil. Freed predicts that 20 years from now we'll be singing songs by Frankie Lymon, the Flamingos, and the Penguins, and we know in our hearts he is right.

In 1958 I started watching Freed on Channel 5 in the late afternoon, with his teenage dance party program, *The Big Beat*. Here we get to actually see him as he talks to Buddy Holly about plane crashes, and brings on ex-



Even while being booked at a police station, Freed, with WINS PD Mel Leeds and Peter Tripp of WMGM, were in a disc-jocular mood.

con Little Willie John to sing "Fever," eschewing Peggy Lee and the white-bread travesties of others like Pat Boone. It would prove to be his undoing.

On November 24, 1959, the *New York Mirror* headlines "Freed Out in TV Squeeze." The payola scandals erupt big time, and it is the saddest day of my childhood. I cry long into the night, as WABC (where he had moved the previous year following a riot at a show he



Rock and roll fans are barely barricaded in front of the New York Paramount in 1957.

presented in Boston), and WNEW-TV drop him. We all feel it is because he won't play the soulless major label artists whose cover versions of rock hits are sad facsimiles of the all-night-long down-and-dirty real thing. Freed, we know, just plays the songs he really likes, and, in the process, developed a whole generation's distaste for the ersatz. No wonder they got rid of him.



"The most important thing is the artists and the songs they write. They put their whole souls into writing those songs."  
—Howie Klein

There are others who had almost as strong an effect on the radio dial of the time. I remember fighting each morning with my mother over control of the radio. She was stuck in a WWI mode with "Rambling John Gambling" on WOR, whose idea of great music was "I've Got Sixpence (Jolly Jolly Sixpence)." I insisted on tuning to the far right side of the dial, to "Pear Shape" Jack Walker, whose rhyming patter went: "You put the J with the A and the C with the K, write on a postcard what you want him to play, go around the middle with

*His "rock 'n' roll kingdom" (is) a mythic place where we discover a nascent fellowship of youngsters who might as well be from another planet, as far as our elders are concerned.*



a measuring tape, whaddya got? Pear Shape. [whispered] Pear Shape? [louder] Pear Shape!" When he played "Tutti Frutti" one winter morning, it was the first time I ever heard my mother swear: "Turn off that goddamn booga-wooga jungle music!"

I was in hormonal heaven.

Then there was the incomparable Jocko Henderson on W-A-D-O Radio, twelve-eighty-oh on your radio. He was a close friend of Freed's, and their playlists were very similar. It was to him that we turned after Freed signed off each evening. "Way up here in the stratosphere, gotta holler loud and clear," he

*Roger Steffens is an actor, author, archivist, and lecturer whose radio career began on WVOX in Westchester, New York in 1961 and included ten years on KCRW in Los Angeles. An acclaimed expert on the life of Bob Marley, he is the co-author of *Bob Marley: Spirit Dancer* (Norton) and the forthcoming autobiography of Bunny Wailer. He is the founding editor of *The Beat* magazine.*

began his show. "E-tiddly-ock, oh, this is the Jock and I'm back on the scene with my record machine, sayin' ooh-pop-a-do and how do you do? Ready for your race into outer space?" His live shows were in Harlem's Apollo, and he even had a dance party show on Channel 13 opposite Freed's (an unfortunate and impossible choice for us), with regular features like "Bermuda Shorts Day."

Radio after Freed's downfall was never the same for me. Perhaps it was the fact that I was growing up, heading off for college in 1960, and had less time for it. But the feelings of unity and mutual community that Freed had inspired in us were fading out like the do-pop vocal groups that helped spawn them. The medium was transmuting into commercial pop and "Good Guys" radio, with interchangeable presenters with dollar signs in their eyes.

In 1996, I was invited to be the first speaker at the new Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, built in Cleveland—home of Alan Freed's first big radio success. Before my talk, I toured the room devoted to Freed's history and an adjoining chamber where ranks of classic radios were on display. My heart leaped when I spied, ensconced behind glass, the exact same Bendix radio, right down to the brown knobs, on which I had surreptitiously listened to the King of the Moondogger all those years ago. At the end of my lecture, I made a formal presentation to the Hall's radio archives of early broadcast tapes I had made of Freed's programs, holding a microphone in front of the Bendix's grilled speakers. All the major musical threads in my life came together at that moment, and my cheek was moist as I walked offstage. Funny how things said 40 years ago can stay with you forever. Radio has a way of doing that. ☺



"I knew I was a professional songwriter the first time I ever heard a song of mine on the air!"  
— Barbara Duron