

MYSTERY AND DEATH ON THE RIVIERA BY DOMINICK DUNNE

VANITY FAIR

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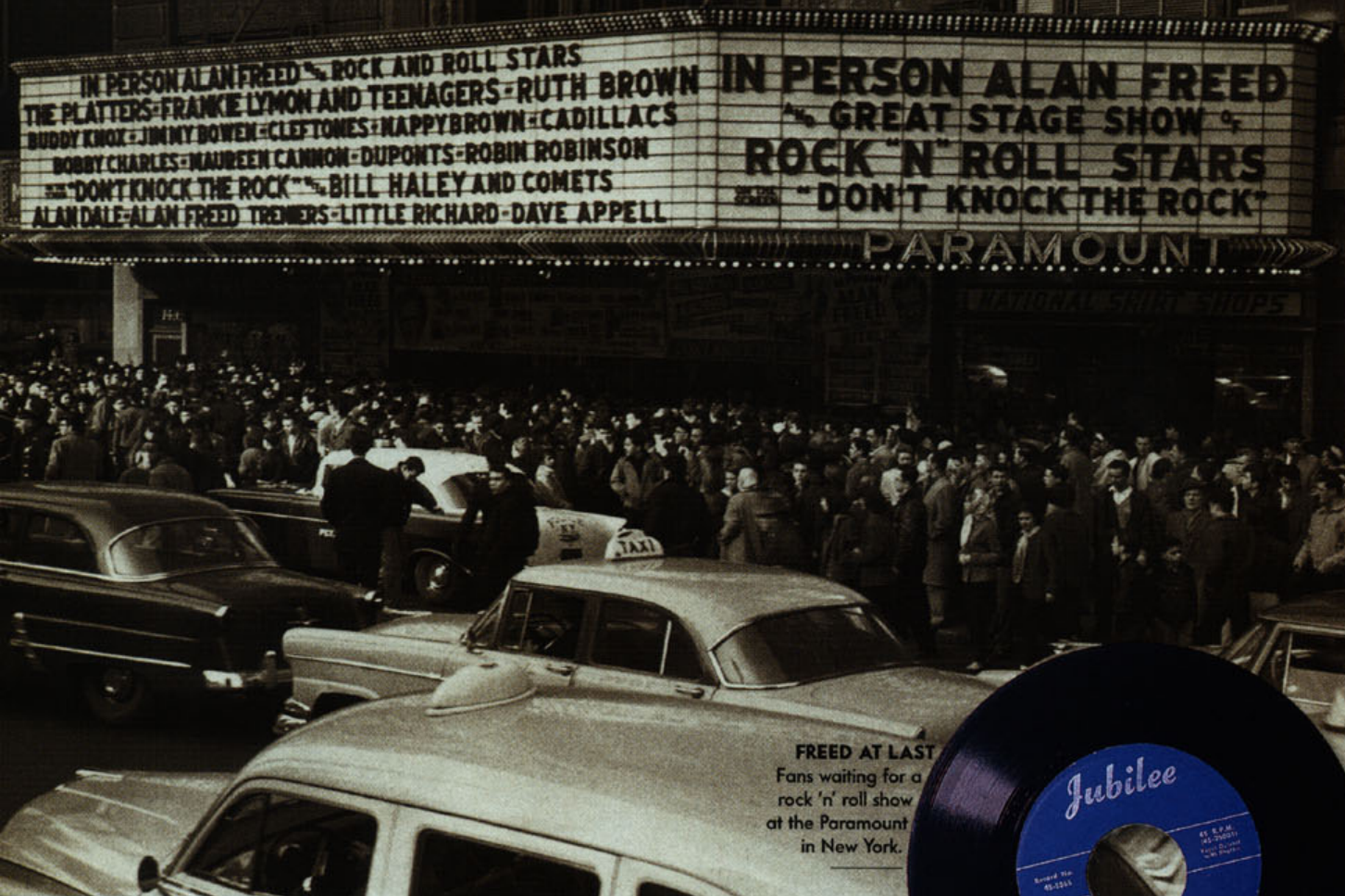
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FREED AT LAST
Fans waiting for a rock 'n' roll show at the Paramount in New York.

HIPSTERS AND HOODLUMS

It was the Second Coming of rock 'n' roll, as the music shed its rotgut image for a milk-shake market. But innocence was only a pose. Men who gambled on a strange new sound are still telling their Runyonesque stories of payola and wiseguys, of bookies, shakedown, and the Brill Building

BY NICK TOSCHES

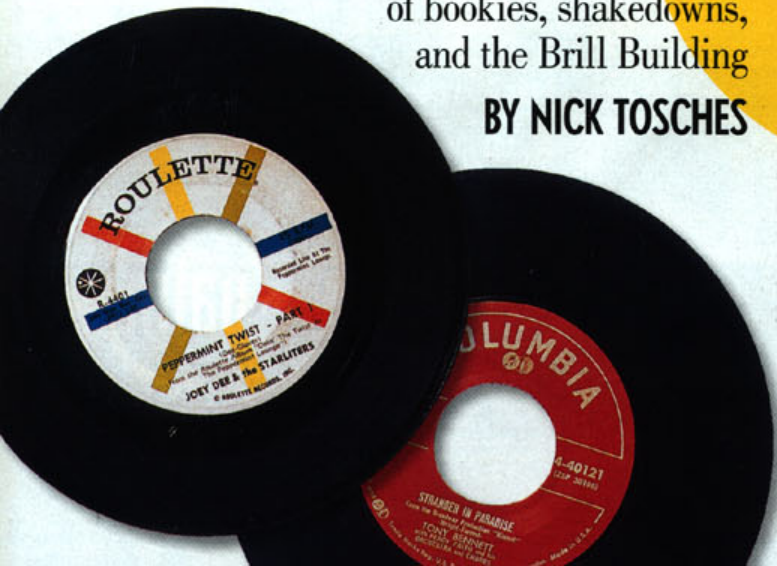
It was a time, all right . . .

So, anyway, this character, this punk of a disc jockey from Chicago, ends up working here in New York. We had this record, nice little record, "Just One More Tear," by a girl named Laurie Ann Mathews. She was good. She was white, but she sounded black.

We need to break out the record. This is back in 1962 or so. It was pay for play. That's what promotion was all about. A hundred, a few hundred bucks. Five hundred, a thousand copies of the record that they could take down to the store to sell.

So this D.J.—he's like a midget, this guy, about four and a half feet high—I guess he figures he's a big shot. He takes the money, but he don't play the record. What he does, he goes on the air, says, "I'm about to break this new record." And then he breaks it—I mean, breaks it, cracks it into pieces—says, "I wouldn't play this record if my mother gave it to me." Like I say, I guess this little prick thinks he's something. Maybe all that candy-ass Chicago tough-guy shit went to his head. Anyway, he wasn't in Chicago no more. This was New York.

It was said that Hymie Weiss, the Romanian-born Jew who had founded Old Town Records in the cloakroom of the Triboro Theatre in Harlem in 1954, chose to call his label by that name because his brother and partner, Sam



TOP: BY POSIE RANDOLPH

Weiss, had been working for a Brooklyn paper company called Old Town and had a lot of stationery bearing that name. Hymie remembers his first act as "a guy named Cherokee," remembers that he sold the guy "a car that wouldn't start unless you pushed it downhill."

Old Town survived through black doo-wop groups, such as the Solitaires, who achieved local success in the northeastern golden triangle of New York–Newark–Philadelphia. The label would later prosper with national hit records by Arthur Prysock—Hy's favorite—and the Earls, a white doo-wop group from the Bronx. Within a year of Old Town's inception, Hy moved into a real office, down on Seventh Avenue, and by 1958 he was operating out of 1697 Broadway, just up the road from the cathedral of the music business, the Brill Building, 1619 Broadway, at 49th Street.

After the Chicago disc jockey's act of insolence, Hy Weiss arranged a meeting with him at the Old Town office, which was on the ninth floor. The record wasn't Hy's; he was only acting as an intermediary for the aggrieved parties. Also present was Carmine De Noia, a Broadway bookmaker who was a friend of those in the music business. Carmine was an imposing man. His friends called him Wassel, a nickname derived from his boyhood mispronunciation of the word "rascal."

"I used to help them," Wassel says, not much less imposing today, at 75, than he was in the old days. "See, I was the only Italian guy on Broadway, and I didn't take no crap from nobody. I respected everybody, but nobody would fool with me because I would never rob anybody."

"So here's this disc jockey, this little midget. I throw open the window, pick him up, shake him out by the ankles."

Wassel laughs, his memory wandering back over 40 years, his voice deep, sonorous, and disarmingly blithe. "Hy goes into the other room. So here's this disc jockey. And I'm looking at him, and he's, like, this little midget. I throw open the window, pick him up, flip him, shake him out by the ankles. Ninth floor. All the change fell out of his pockets. Some friends of mine picked it up."

The disc jockey played the record during his very next broadcast, and he kept playing it. Soon, however, he was back in Chicago.

"He denied it ever happened," Wassel says. "Some guys asked him. He denied it. I said, 'Let him deny it. That's all right. Let him deny it.'"

"See," says another old-timer, "it wasn't that this guy didn't want to play the record. It was that he took the money, then didn't play the record. He wasn't a stand-up guy."

"Same thing as today, lot of fakers."

We are sitting around a big table in the back room of a restaurant—much talk of recent surgeries and current medical conditions; much ordering of eggs and sausages to be prepared in exacting and arcane Italianate manners; and then the stories.

"Yeah," says Wassel. "I remember, there was this song I liked—and Sid Weiss"—a songwriter, no relation to Hy—"gave the publishing on it to me. So what am I gonna do with it now? Am I gonna put it on the wall? I don't know anything about publishing."

Wassel got a telephone call from a song publisher whose name is lost to the years, as is the name of the song in question.

"Your name Wassel?"

"Yeah."

"You got a song we want."

"I don't want no trouble."

"We want the song."

Wassel wrapped a length of pipe in a rolled-up newspaper. "I went up there, and the guy was a nasty guy. If he would've talked nice to me, I would've gave it to him. I didn't care; I didn't know anything about publishing. So, anyway, I went up there. This guy's sitting at his desk with his feet on the desk."

"Listen," Wassel told the guy, "what do you want?"

"You know what I want. Just put the song over there."

Wassel looked at him. "I says, 'Here.' I came down with the pipe. I broke everything. The desk, everything."

Had the would-be wiseguy asked, he would have received. But, as Wassel says, "he was trying to shake me down."

Everybody was trying to shake down everybody. Among the Jews who ran the music business, it was

treachery without end within the temple. "Every time guys came up to Hy Weiss's office," Wassel remembers, "they were trying to shake him down. 'Hey, man, you got any bread?' I'd be there. I'd say, 'Look, this ain't no grocery store. I mean, this is a grocery store? It's not a grocery store.' One guy pulled a knife. I didn't care. I was wild then. But we were trying to make a living; that's all we wanted to do."

There was the day he was called up to the Brill Building office of a music-publishing company, which was run by a couple of brothers who were generally regarded as pricks. A kid, a young songwriter who wrote for the Fiestas, a group that recorded for Hy Weiss, was trying to get a long-overdue royalty statement from the brothers. The kid had one of them against the wall and was holding a broken Coca-Cola bottle to his throat when Wassel arrived.

"I took the broken Coke bottle from the kid and told the guy, 'Send him his statement.'"

Money, money, money—"Money Honey," as the Drifters sang in 1953—all the time, money.

But not always money. Men such as Wassel in those days were paid as promotion men; and, as recalcitrant disc jockeys discovered the hard way, they were quite effective as such. But promotion also encompassed a wider and gentler, albeit often subrosa, range of duties, not restricted to the milieu of the small, mongrel record companies. There was the time when one of the biggest and most established of the major companies called in an outside "promotion man" to tail one of its most successful pop singers, a household name. Tailing this young performer was a sort of undercover form of public-relations insurance.

"You know," one of the old-timers tells me, "make sure he steered clear of the wrong people, wrong places."

I don't quite understand.

"You know."

I don't know. Was this young golden throat consorting with the Mob?

I get a look that seems to say: I'm talking about *wrong* people, *wrong* places.

"They wanted to make sure nobody caught him with a dick in his mouth."

Hy Weiss had been a bouncer at a White Rose bar in his early years and was himself occasionally called upon to aid a friend in promotion-related undertakings. There was a call one morning from a man who, with his wife, ran one of the premier R&B companies. They were having problems with a distributor with whom they had contracted to share space in their building on 10th Avenue, and they could not get him out.

"You gotta meet me at seven in the



morning," the label owner says to Hy. It was a Saturday morning.

"O.K. What for?"

"When you get here."

"You sure it's important?"

"Absolutely."

Hy arrives early Saturday morning. There's the guy, and he's holding a big metal can.

"I got gas."

Hy wants to know "What are you gonna do with this gas?"

"I'm gonna burn down the building."

"Hey, I don't cook on Saturday." The Sabbath.

Wassel's elusive career in the undergrowth of the music business dated to the early 50s, during the golden age of rock 'n' roll. He was, as he says, a bookmaker, taking action on horses among the Broadway crowd, of which the growing cast of characters in the burgeoning

world of rock 'n' roll were fast replacing the Tin Pan Alley veterans who had occupied the Brill Building since 1931.

"It didn't last very long," he says of his Broadway bookmaking days, which began in 1949. "I used to go to Jack Dempsey's to get a little action. I used to go to Lindy's, to Gallagher's."

These were the mythic places of old Broadway: Gallagher's, on West 52nd Street, which had begun as a speakeasy in 1927; Lindy's, on Broadway, just north of the Brill Building, a restaurant and hangout that operated round the clock and which had been the "Mindy's" of Damon Runyon's tale-telling; Jack Dempsey's, which was located on the ground floor of the Brill Building. The Jewish entrepreneurs of the music business were inveterate gamblers: their success was built upon daring to venture into an untamed new territory—rock 'n' roll—where the established, major companies feared to enter. But the gains of their business gambles were all too often lost to gambling of a more common kind, and it was through their betting that Wassel, during his short-lived career as a bookie, came to know them.

"He knew them because they were all booking through him," one of his friends says.

"That was how they all got in trouble. They gambled and they lost and they couldn't pay off. They shook each other down. But the Mob never shook them down. The Mob never came to them. They came to the Mob, because their gambling debts drove them to the Mob."

Aside from the partnerships of collateral interest pursuant to its role as rock 'n' roll's lender of last resort, the Mob's primary involvement with rock 'n' roll, as it had been for many years with the music business in general, was through the jukebox rack-

et. Since 1946, exclusive licenses to sell Wurlitzer jukeboxes had been held by the Emby Distributing Company. Located on West 43rd Street, Emby was controlled by Frank Costello and Meyer Lansky, the two biggest gangsters in New York. Until recently, in certain quarters, one might still be urged to pump change into the jukebox with the wry words "Play another record; their daughters need new Cadillacs."

Coins clinking into the big, incandescent Bakelite jukebox. Coins showering to the street from a ninth-story window. Yes, it was a time.

It was the time of rock 'n' roll's innocence—that is to say, its incarnation of innocence. The golden age of rock 'n' roll can be said to have begun in 1945, when hip black urban music diverged into two distinct revolutionary currents: the more cerebral and Apollonian freshet of bebop, and the more febrile and Dionysian torrent of rhythm and blues, as pioneered by blues shouters of the day such as Wynonie Harris. That age would last for little more than a decade. Elvis Presley marked its end, and it was as if the golden age of real rock 'n' roll had never been: the all-powerful consumer mainstream of white America, in its belated discovery of rock 'n' roll, knew only the banal Wonder Bread of its usurpation by the forces of market-friendly mediocrity.

This is not to say that the inchoate beast of rock 'n' roll had raged in sovereignty from World War II until the ascendancy of Elvis. **IN CONTINUED ON PAGE 207**

In certain quarters, one might still be urged to feed the jukebox with the words "Play another record; their daughters need new Cadillacs."



MONEY, HONEY

From far left: Frank Costello, who, with Meyer Lansky, controlled the jukebox racket; a Wurlitzer jukebox; the Brill Building, center of New York's record business (conveniently located on the ground floor was Jack Dempsey's restaurant, a center of New York's bookmaking business); Arthur Prysock, an early star on Old Town Records.

LEFT: BY LEONARD MCCOMBE. SECOND FROM LEFT: BY JOHN PAUL ENDRSS. SECOND FROM RIGHT: BY WILLIAM E. SAURO

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 202 1951—the year that saw the release of Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats' "Rocket '88"—become perhaps the first truly devastating rock 'n' roll wrecking ball to hit No. 1 in its demolition of the rhythm-and-blues charts—there were also far less feral manifestations of rock 'n' roll that enjoyed even greater success: Amos Milburn's soft and fatalistic "Bad, Bad Whiskey," Charles Brown's haunting classic, "Black Night." And while two of the raunchiest, rockiest vocal-group records, "Work with Me, Annie" and "Sexy Ways," both by Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, dated to the months before Elvis's first recordings, in 1954, the much more innocuous fare of doo-wop had by then come to define the New York vocal-group sound of the Brill Building's ever increasing dominion.

As chronicled in detail in the introduction to my book *Unsung Heroes of Rock 'n' Roll*, the music had begun to change in the middle of a war, when the world was mad and big-band swing was still the rage. Benny Goodman, Harry James, Glenn Miller, and the Dorsey brothers were the men whose music dominated the early 1940s. Columbia, which had Goodman and James; Victor, which had Miller and Tommy Dorsey; and Decca, which had Jimmy Dorsey, were the three companies that dominated the industry. But as the new music spread, and as it became obvious that the prospering major companies were for the most part unaware of and uninterested in the sea change, numerous little labels were founded by men and women who smelled money in what was happening. In 1942, Herman Lubinsky started Savoy Records in downtown Newark. In Los Angeles, in 1944, the songwriter Otis René started Excelsior ("The All Colored Recording Company"). In Harlem, Ike and Bess Berman formed Apollo. The mongrel labels were a book of begats, a Fourth Book of Moses unto themselves—Exclusive and DeLuxe, National and King, Modern and Aladdin, Mercury and Specialty, Atlantic and Chess, Duke and Sun, Vee-Jay and Old Town, and hundreds more. They were the true breeding ground and glory ground of rock 'n' roll.

The industry establishment did not quite know what to make of the new music, and by 1954 the major companies were paying for their sins. Looking askance for too long at rock 'n' roll, regarding it as a fad that soon would pass, they began to see how much money they had been missing out on since the late 40s. All the best-selling rock 'n' roll hits, all the biggest artists, had belonged to those mongrel labels, some of which, such as Atlantic and Chess, were on their way to becoming major labels.

As 1955 began, the big old-line compa-

nies were trying desperately to cash in. Since they did not understand what rock 'n' roll was, the maladroit rushing of their greed was marvelous to behold. Columbia decided that Tony Bennett would be its rock 'n' roll star. DIG THE CRAZIEST!! HE SWINGS!! HE ROCKS!! HE GOES!! Bennett's "Close Your Eyes" was advertised as an ASTOUNDING RHYTHM AND BLUES RENDITION. Needless to say, Tony didn't make it as a rock 'n' roll star. But by the end of the year no one was laughing at RCA-Victor. If the label couldn't make it, the label would buy it: in late November, RCA-Victor bought Elvis Presley from Sam Phillips's little Sun Records of Memphis, and in 1956, with Elvis, RCA-Victor marked the beginning of the end not only of the golden age of untamed rock 'n' roll but of that age's mongrel labels as well. Those few that survived became major labels, or lingered on for a while, then were consumed or vanished, and a whole new wave of small labels, such as Paris and Roulette, came into being as the maverick masters of rock 'n' roll's incarnation of innocence.

The ascendancy of the pose of innocence can be traced to 1954, the year of Elvis's first records and of "Gee" by the Crows. Indeed, the Crows' record, which some consider, oddly, to be the first rock 'n' roll hit—a misguided assertion based solely on the fact that, while other records had crossed over from the R&B to the pop chart, "Gee," in the spring of 1954, broke simultaneously on both charts—was about as sweet and innocent as it got. If anything, "Gee," like Elvis, was the sunset of one age and the dawning of another: the first hit not of rock 'n' roll but of rock 'n' roll's silver age, the age of its rebirth, like a virgin, to sing its songs of moneymaking innocence beneath the windows of a new and innocent generation. From rotgut to milk shakes, do-rags to ponytails. In 1950, Wynonie Harris had pulled off a joyous Top 10 R&B hit, "Good Morning Judge," about running wild with a 15-year-old girl. In 1957—the year the Everly Brothers hit No. 1 on both the R&B and pop charts with "Wake Up Little Susie," a song about the anticipation of parental reprimand when curfew is violated by dozing off chastely during a date—Andre Williams, hanging tough and true to the spirit, could not find a breach even at the bottom of the R&B charts with his "Jail Bait." The following year, however, embracing the new, antithetical ethos of innocence, Chuck Berry—who would later



The industry establishment thought rock 'n' roll was nothing more than a passing fad. By the mid-1950s the major labels were paying for their sins.

do time for violating the Mann Act—captured the R&B and pop charts, and the hearts of young America, with "Sweet Little Sixteen," a saccharine ditty that might have brought a gleam of inspiration to Norman Rockwell's eye.

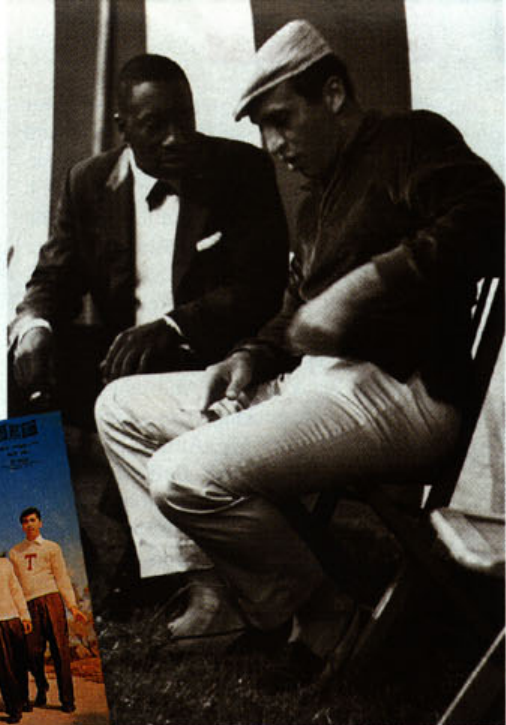
There would be a lot of good records during the age of innocence, but they would be anomalies. It would not be until the warm days of 1965—the Stones' "Satisfaction," Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*—that resurrection would come, in a sudden exundant wave.

George Goldner was in his early 30s, married to a Latin-American woman, and an aficionado of the recent mambo craze when he started his Tico recording company in 1948. Tico became the dominant label in Latin music, and less than two years after its founding, Goldner began a subsidiary label, Rama, to take advantage of the new black doo-wop music. With the immense success of Rama's recording of the Crows' "Gee," Goldner then started Gee Records in 1954. It was Goldner who subsequently "discovered" Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers, whose first and biggest hit, "Why



TWISTS AND TURNS

Left, the Shangri-Las recorded for George Goldner, who also had Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. Right, singer Joe Williams with Morris Levy, who took over Goldner's labels by way of gambling debts. Levy's acts included Joey Dee and the Starliners.



"George Goldner," says one old-timer, "was the genius of the business." Unfortunately, he was also a degenerate gambler.

"Do Fools Fall in Love?," was released by Gee in early 1956.

"George Goldner," as one old-timer tells me, "was the genius of the business."

We are still sitting around the big table at the back of the restaurant, and as tribute to Goldner is paid, and while others concur, Hy Weiss, frail and gentle in his old age, scowls benignly, nonchalantly shakes his head, and points silently, almost privately, to himself.

"Don't mention George Goldner," says Weiss (just some coffee, plain eggs, no sausage). "He was a figment of my imagination." This dismissal is Hy's way of saying that it was he, not Goldner, who found Frankie Lymon: "I gave him the Teenagers."

Whether or not Goldner was the genius maximus of the business, one thing was certain: by the fall of 1955, Goldner had cut in a curious new partner, Joe Kolsky, the brother of a man named Phil Kahl, who was in partnership in music publishing with one Moishe Levy.

It is difficult to state with certainty the roles played by the brothers Kahl and Kol-

sky in what became Goldner's dance in the dark with Moishe Levy. Kahl had entered into open alliance with Levy in early 1953, with the formation of Patricia Music, a publishing operation that also handled several performers, including the brilliant but doomed and demon-beset jazz pianist Bud Powell. Whatever his experience in the music business, Kahl was known as Fingers—a reference, not so much sinister as cynical, to his primary career as a hairdresser at the Concord Hotel in the Catskills. Kolsky, George Goldner's new partner who was presented in the course of business as a produce tycoon, was in fact the proprietor of a fruit stand in the Bronx.

The Bronx. It was where Hy Weiss lived. It was where Phil Spector was born. It was where Dion, the greatest of the white doo-wop masters, came from. Dion had a group called the Timberlanes, then he had the Belmonets. "A friend of mine sent them to me," remembers Wassel.

"Who was your friend?"

"Some guy."

"Just some guy?"

"A wiseguy."

Wassel says the guy is still alive, says he'll call to ask if it's all right for me to use his name.

And the Bronx was where Moishe Levy grew up. He went by the name of Morris, but those who knew him called him Moe when they didn't call him Moishe. He was

in his early 20s when he took over Birdland, the celebrated jazz nightclub, named for Charlie "Bird" Parker, that opened in 1949 on 52nd Street at Broadway. Even then there was a mythology about the man who called himself Morris Levy. He had won control of the joint in a card game, it was said—drawing three 7s, playing one-on-one against the

owner—though many swear that Levy never gambled except for an occasional game of craps. Wassel remembers him as a kid flipping hamburgers at the Turf, which, like Jack Dempsey's, faced Broadway from the street level of the Brill Building. He had then become a photo developer of pictures taken of patrons by nightclub camera girls and also operated coat-check concessions in clubs throughout town. Then, mysteriously, he owned clubs: not only Birdland and its sister club, Birdland of Miami, but the Royal Roost, the Downbeat, the Embers, and the Round Table—all, at one time or another, were said or known to have been Levy's joints.

Then there was this business with George Goldner, who was on a roll in 1955 and just about to come forth with Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. George may have been the genius of the business, but he was not without the Achilles' heel that had brought down a multitude of his lessers. He was a degenerate gambler. By 1957, Goldner's record companies, already given over to Levy's forces, were subsumed by a new company, Roulette, whose partners were Goldner and Kolsky—the fruit vendor—and whose president was Levy.

Within three months, Goldner was out of the picture altogether, his interest in Roulette, as well as all participation in the rights to his Tico, Rama, and Gee catalogues, ceded wholly to what *Billboard* referred to as “the Morris Levy combine.”

Roulette under Levy prospered well into the 60s. “Peppermint Twist,” by Joey Dee—Joey DiNicola of Passaic, New Jersey—and the Starlites, was released by Roulette in late 1961 and became nearly as big a hit as Chubby Checker’s version of “The Twist,” making the Peppermint Lounge the most celebrated nightclub in America. It was on Roulette, too, that Arkansas-born Ronnie Hawkins had his first Top 40 hit, “Mary Lou,” in 1959. Hawkins remained with Levy and Roulette through 1963, two years before members of his band, the



“This agent, he sounds all serious: ‘I want to talk to you.’ Then he holds up this little hand-lettered sign: I’M WIRED.”

Hawks, began working with Bob Dylan and eventually became the Band.

For all the wealth it brought him, Morris Levy never much cared for rock ‘n’ roll, a friend of his told me. “Morris loved jazz. He didn’t like rock ‘n’ roll.”

George Goldner went on to have some success with two new companies, End and Gone, but these labels, too, ended up in Levy’s hands. With the songwriting team of Leiber and Stoller, he went on in 1965 to form yet another company, Red Bird, which had its share of hits, by the Shangri-Las and others; but both the partnership and the label soon dissolved, and Goldner died a few years later, in 1970, at the age of 52.

Not only was he a genius, says one who knew him, by way of epitaph, but “he was one hell of a sharp dresser too.”

But what of Morris Levy’s genius? In a group, as at that big round back-room table, the old-timers are wary, evasive in answering.

“He could spot a winner,” says one.

“The ‘essence of his genius?’” says another, smiling and wryly using the phrase

I had offered. “Robbing everybody.”

“He never gambled.”

“He took over underdogs.”

“Morris hated to give up money. Money was his god, and he was devout in his religion.”

“What was that saying? ‘This is my grocery store. I do all the robbin’ here.’”

“If you sold a million records, he’d say you sold a hundred thousand. Moe was pretty sharp with that. That was his thing.”

“But he wasn’t doing anything that everybody else wasn’t doing.”

“They weren’t thieves. They just did business their own way. It was a way of business.”

“People say how they got robbed,” says Hy Weiss. “They didn’t get robbed. I didn’t rob anybody, and neither did a lot of other people that are accused. Why? Because at that particular time everybody was offering what they had for sale. In fact, I had a song called ‘So Fine’—a minor Old Town hit by the Fiestas, a Newark group, in 1959—and I gave it up. Somebody said they owned it, I says good-bye like an idiot. That wouldn’t happen again in a million years, you know what I’m saying?”

The most important figure in the introduction of rock ‘n’ roll—real rock ‘n’ roll—to white America was the legendary Alan Freed (1922–65), who began broadcasting R&B records over WJW in Cleveland in the summer of 1951. Though the audience for the records he played was predominantly black, his Judeo-Christian benediction of the music served to draw an increasingly integrated group of listeners. By 1953 his rock ‘n’ roll touring shows, which featured the likes of Count Basie and Lester Young as well as of Big Joe Turner, Wynonie Harris, Ruth Brown, and the Clovers, were success and sensation, bringing him controversial celebrity and fortune both. When he moved to New York to work at WINS in the late summer of 1954—the cusp between rock ‘n’ roll’s golden and silver ages—he came as the most powerful disc jockey in the land.

The man who took control of his career in New York was Morris Levy.

“That was the secret of Moishe’s success,” I was told. “He controlled Freed.” And, in those pay-for-play days, Freed, whose plays were the biggest, got the biggest pay. “Every record company that was in business selling R&B had a deal with Alan Freed. Atlantic, King, Federal—all of them. And they all had to come up with the money. That’s the way it was.” Freed made money. Morris made money.

In a group, these are the things that are said, and in all of what is said there is truth. These men know

what they are talking about, and there seems to be no special fondness for Levy among them.

There are a lot of stories from the Birdland days. It was Irving Levy, Moishe’s brother, who helped manage the joint.

“He was a sweetheart, Irving. I was there the night he was killed. He had a hooker there, didn’t want her there, and he chased her out. Her husband caused a big commotion, stabbed Irving, killed him. So then it was like open season. All the jukebox guys used to hang in the Birdland mostly. And everybody’s out for the husband.”

“He loved broads,” one says of Morris, who would marry and divorce several times.

But what of all the tales about Levy’s being deeper into the Mob than the rest of them?

“Bullshit.”

But alone, some speak differently. One takes me aside, his arm around me, whispering though we are in earshot of no one.

“Let me tell you,” he says. His hushed words are delivered slowly and surely: “Morris simply could not have done what he did alone.”

In 1959, it was announced that the House Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight was preparing to investigate commercial bribery in the music industry. Alan Freed, broken by the ensuing scandals of the lengthy payola hearings, died impoverished and disgraced in the year that later brought the sudden, exuberant wave of rock ‘n’ roll’s resurrection. As for Levy, he was charged in 1986 on counts of criminal conspiracy with several alleged mafiosi, was convicted of extortion conspiracy in 1988, and, following the failure of an appeal, was scheduled to report to federal prison when, in the spring of 1990, aged 62, he died at the manor house of his estate, a 1,300-acre horse farm in Ghent, New York.

Of course, the payola scandals stopped nothing. Alan Freed was just the sacrificial fatted calf. Juggy Gayles, the legendary song plugger—the man who broke “White Christmas” for Irving Berlin, the man who got Kate Smith to take up Berlin’s “God Bless America”—had known Freed since the disc jockey’s early



days in Cleveland. "What can I tell ya?" Juggy Gayles said a few years ago when I asked him about Freed and payola. Freed, he said, "was a genius, and he was a power to reckon with." But, at the same time, "Freed was a schmuck. He went around and shot his mouth off. They would've forgot about him if he had kept his mouth shut." As Gayles implied, rock 'n' roll and payola were inseparable. It went back to the big-band days. "Some of those Mickey Mouse bandleaders, we'd slip 'em 10 bucks to play a chorus because we needed a quick plug," said Juggy. But with the rise of rock 'n' roll, "payola was all over the place. . . . Booze, bribes, and broads: that was rock 'n' roll."

Inquisition, prosecution mattered not. At the masque of innocence, it was business as usual.

"There was nothing wrong with it," says one of the guys.

"What was that guy, the disc jockey from Boston who became head of Warner Bros. Records?" asks Hy Weiss. "Joe Smith,

that's him. Well, what did he say about me? He said I made up the \$50 handshake.

"One day the door opened and Internal Revenue walked in. I said, 'Yes?' They said, 'Well, we understand you're doing business with disc jockeys,' and so on. I said, 'What's wrong with that? Everybody's doing business with disc jockeys.' He said, 'But you gave somebody \$5,000.' And I said, 'Who was that, pray tell?' He said, 'You gave it to Alan Freed.' I said, 'I gave it to him?' He says, 'Yeah.' I said, 'Well, wait awhile, let me look at something.' I picked out a check and showed it to him with a little note. He said, 'What's

that?' I said, 'It was a loooaan.' He laughed.

"That night we went out to the track, out to dinner, me and the guy from the I.R.S. And I had to sit there and give him winners.

"I could tell you the end of the story," Weiss concludes, "but I can't get a friend of mine in trouble."

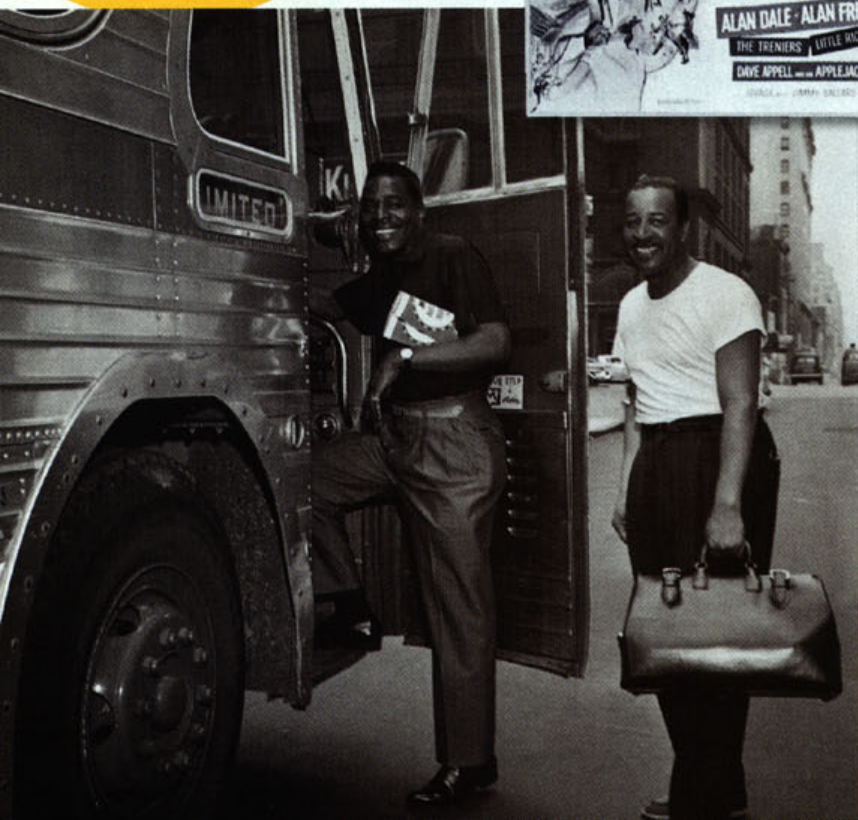
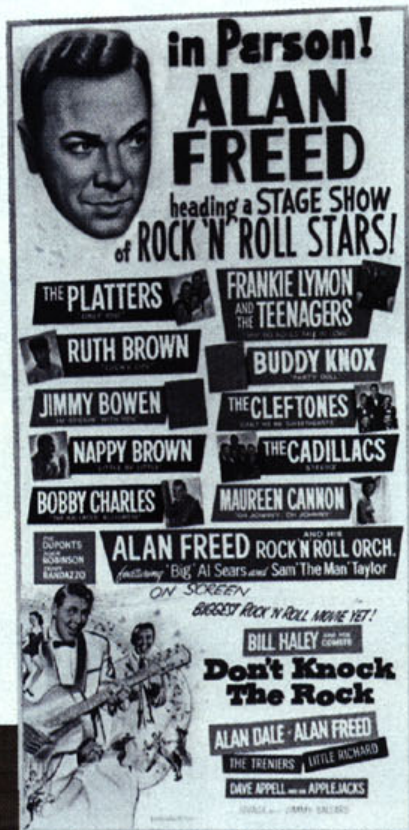
That reminds someone of another investigating agent. "This agent, he sounds all serious: 'I want to talk to you.' Then he holds up this little hand-lettered sign: I'M WIRED."

Bookies, Broadway, the Brill Building, the Boys.

My buddy Geno Sculatti, a true connoisseur of the bizarreries that lurk beneath the stones of popular culture's forgotten back streets, went off in search of a guy named Tony Bruno, a singer who in 1967 released an album called *The Beauty of Bruno*, "a post-rock lounge record," as Geno has described it, full of wondrously "beefy, button-popping vocals." *The Beauty of Bruno* is an artifact equal in rarity and obscurity to *Little Joe Sure Can Sing!*, the album, released a year later, that Joe Pesci recorded under the name of Little Joe Ritchie.

Those were strange days, as Jim Morrison sang in the year of *The Beauty of Bruno*. People remember "Strange Days," as well they should. But what of Hank Ballard's re-appearance on the R&B charts in 1968—Hank Ballard, who had been at

"Alan Freed was a schmuck. He went around and shot his mouth off. They would've forgot about him if he had kept his mouth shut."



GOOD MORNING, JUDGE
From left: Brook Benton and Wynonie Harris (with bag) on tour; 1956 lobby card; Alan Freed, pre-scandal; Maxine Brown, who had a very surprising hit.



FAR LEFT, BY POESIE RANDOLPH

it since 1952, had shotgun-blasted the sensibilities of America in 1954 with "Work with Me, Annie" and "Sexy Ways," had originated "The Twist" in 1959, and was still only 32 when he came back with "How You Gonna Get Respect (When You Haven't Cut Your Process Yet)?" Well, as Jim Morrison also had it, and truly enough, people are strange.

My buddy Geno finally found Tony Bruno, who was living quietly in Florida. Bruno generously shared with him the story of how he had gotten into the music business, back in 1960:

"I was hangin' around the Brill Building, takin' action for this bookie from New Jersey. I was doing pretty well, so he set me up with an office, and we pretended it was a record label. I had my desk, a small turntable, and eight or nine phones."

The lettering on the office door read NOMAR RECORDS, the nonce word Nomar being a partial reverse spelling of the surname of Bruno's boss. It was inevitable, in that hive of aspiration and hustling which was the Brill Building, that someone should eventually knock on the door of Nomar Records looking for a deal. That inevitability came in the form of Maxine Brown, a young singer from South Carolina bearing an acetate demonstration recording of a song she'd written called "All in My Mind." To press and release the record would lend the bookmaking front a further illusory air of legitimacy.

But something went wrong. Maxine Brown's "All in My Mind," released by Nomar Records in December of 1960, entered the R&B charts during the following

month and eventually became one of the major hits of the year, rising to No. 2 on the R&B charts, crossing over to the pop Top 20, and selling about 800,000 copies before it ran its course. Another Maxine Brown hit, almost as big, followed. By comparison, the bookmaking operation, eight phones and all, seemed little more than a chump-change racket. It was thus that Tony Bruno became a producer and songwriter, and, after years of prospering as such, gave unto the world *The Beauty of Bruno*.

Jubilee Records, founded in Washington, D.C., in 1946 by Herb Abramson, and taken over by Jerry Blaine in 1947, epitomized the scattershot approach of the mongrel labels: record, buy, or lease anything you could, get it out there, and see what shook. Jubilee put out records by the Delta Rhythm Boys, Charlie Mingus, Enzo Sturti, the Orioles, and a slew of characters who specialized in risqué "party" records. The rarest of all rock 'n' roll records, the example of scattershot negligence par excellence, was released, nominally, by Jubilee in 1952: "Stormy Weather," by the Five Sharps, of which only one unbroken, 78-r.p.m. copy is said to exist—a disk now reportedly valued at more than \$50,000.

Jerry Blaine also operated various Jubilee subsidiary labels: Josie records brought forth the Cadillacs and their hit "Speedoo"; Gross was reserved for albums by Doug Clark and the Hot Nuts. In the early 60s, Blaine started yet another subsidiary, called Chex.

In was in June of 1962 that young Freddy DeMann of Brooklyn began working for Blaine as a promotion man of the non-defenestrating kind. The exact date was June 5, Freddy's 23rd birthday.

DeMann, who 21 years later became Madonna's manager, remembers Blaine as a gruff-speaking man given to talk of lavish excess. He was at the Jubilee office when somebody came in looking to sell a recording to Blaine.

"Whaddaya want for it?" Blaine demanded.

A price of \$500 was suggested with some hesitation.

"Five hundred?" growled Blaine. "Shit, man, I pay more than that for whores."

Blaine, however, gave DeMann nothing in the way of pay-for-play gelt when he sent him out in 1962 to promote "I Love You," by the Volumes, on the new Chex

label. Without the cash, DeMann discovered, the record was trash.

Freddy met a fellow promotion man, a guy named Danny Driscoll who worked for Smash, a subsidiary of Mercury. Danny tried to shore him.

"He was a big fat guy," DeMann says. "Jovial. Funny. 'Call me Fat Ass,' he used to say. 'I'm not gonna call you Fat Ass,' I said. 'Come on, everybody calls me Fat Ass.' He was a colorful guy. Then one day they found him dead in a car. He was a fag, and the story I heard is that some sailor killed him or something like that. But I don't know if that's the truth. Maybe the Boys got him. I have no clue."

That was one thing that Freddy learned quickly: it was a strange racket. The Boys cast a lot of shadows; there were a lot of maybes as to what went on. Like many of the promotion guys in the early 60s, he hung out at Al & Dick's, a joint on 54th Street near Broadway whose premises went back to the Volstead Act days. The entertainer Texas Guinan, the darling of the underworld, had run a club there, as well as many other Broadway *boîtes de nuit*, in cahoots with the Boys of that time. Texas Guinan, a role model and inspiration for Mae West, was remembered for her greeting to patrons: "Hello, suckers." But another remark attributed to her held its wisdom as the old days on Broadway gave way to the new: "Success has killed more men than bullets."

DeMann describes the clientele of Al & Dick's as "a Runyonesque group of people. They were all guys in suits with slick black hair. Pompadours, that kind of thing." The disc jockeys, the industry guys, the artists, the friends of friends. "We all looked alike."

"It was an exciting world to come into. And I was, believe me, brand-new. And, yes, I knew there were guys there that could 'get the job done.'"

In the end, without any cash to slip into the sleeves of "I Love You," Freddy, after a long, roundabout journey among unresponsive disc jockeys, found himself in Philadelphia. It was there, in the studio-office of D.J. Jerry Blavat, that he laid down his lantern.

"So, anyway," Blavat tells me, "I'm



"He was a big fat guy. Jovial. Funny. 'Call me Fat Ass,' he used to say. Then one day they found him dead in a car."



doing the radio show, and the promotion men come to see me. I get a knock at the door, and I say to Kilocycle Pete"—a kid who worked at the station—"‘Answer the door,’ which he normally does.

"So it's this young guy. His name is Freddy DeMann. He says, 'I got a record I want you to listen to, and I've got a problem.' I said, 'What's the problem?' He says, 'Nobody will play this record. You're my last resort. I'm gonna lose my gig.' He says, 'There's no money on this record. I have no money for the record.' I said, 'Freddy, let me tell you something. Number one, I don't take money. If I like the record, I play it. My mother can come to me with a record and say, 'Your uncle made this record.' If I don't like the record, I'm not gonna play it. Because for my teenagers, for my audience, I have in my mind the sound I'm gonna present.' To make a long story short, he sits with me while I do the radio show. I listen to the record. I flip over the record. Nobody wants to play the record because they're all looking for this"—he rubs his thumb and two fingers in the universal baksheesh gesture—"and he doesn't have it. I play the record, bust the record wide open. From that moment on, Freddy DeMann and I became friends. His boss, Jerry Blaine, wanted to know, 'How did you get the Geator to play this record with no money?'" (That's Blavat, see, the Geator with the Heater, etymology approximately as follows: the nickname Geator derived from the nickname Gator so as to now rhyme with heater, as in let's-get-down-with-the-sound-and-turn-that-car-heater-up-on-this-cold-Philly-night.) "And Freddy explained to him, 'He liked the record, man, he liked the record.' And that's the way I was from the very beginning to now. You could be my best buddy, but if I don't like the record, I'm not gonna play it."

Blavat was 22 years old and making over a hundred grand a year.

"I mean, back in 1962, that's a lot of money for a little cockroach kid from South Philadelphia."

C'era una volta a Filadelfia . . .

Gerald Joseph Blavat was born, in Philly, on July 3, 1940. "See," he says, "when I was a kid growing up, there were four corners in the neighborhood. Pat's Luncheonette, the grocery store, the Tap Room, and a variety store. These were the four corners of South 17th and Mifflin Streets. The younger guys hung on one corner. Across the street were the older guys. Then, in the Tap Room, were the older wiseguys. And the

variety-store corner, the people in the neighborhood would come in and buy blah, blah, blah, I don't know. And up the side street, the older guys would shoot craps.

"When you grew up in that neighborhood, you knew everybody. You knew everybody. They used to call me Shorts when I was a kid because I was the smallest little guy. But I always knew and respected older people. When I was 12, I was hanging out in the social club with guys 17, 18 years old. By the time I was 16, I was donning a black Stetson, black Continental suit, going into clubs and bars. But I knew how to act, so I always acted older."

Like the Mob in America, Jerry was Jewish and Italian. His father, known as Gimpy Lou, or simply the Gimp, was with the Jewish crew. "He was in the numbers business. When I was a kid, they would ship me off to a day nursery at St. Monica's at six in the morning. We lived in a row house on a street where there were only six houses—everything else was garages—and our house would turn into a bookie joint with all the top Jewish guys working it. Moishe, Sammy, Mickey. When I came home from the day nursery at five, it would turn back into a regular house."

His mother came from the same town in the Chieti Province of Abruzzi as did the wife of Angelo Bruno, the Sicilian-born mafioso to whom control of Philadelphia passed from Joe Ida in the late 50s. It was thus as a boy, through his father's involvement in the numbers racket, and even more through his mother's friendship with Angelo's wife, that Jerry came to know the ascendant boss before the advent of his imperium.

Blavat had been one of the kids who danced on the WFIL-TV show *American Bandstand* in the days before the show's original host, Bob Horn—banished in the wake of scandals involving drunk driving and allegations of sex with a minor—was replaced, in the summer of 1956, by Dick Clark, the cultural hygienist whose smile of cleanliness and rectitude was the smile of milk-and-cookies rock 'n' roll. Another

of the dancers from the Horn show, Danny Rapp, had helped to form and was the lead singer in a local group called the Juvenairs. In 1957 the group became Danny and the Juniors. Their first record, "At the Hop," released toward the end of that year, was one of the biggest



They were days of naïveté and exuberance, the sweet and celibate songs of Paul & Paula. And beneath it all: booze, bribes, and broads.



hits of 1958. When the group set out to tour, it was with Jerry Blavat as their road manager and shepherd.

"These kids were innocent," Jerry says. "I used to get them laid. That was the biggest thing they wanted to do. I was a kid, 18, on the road. I would take them to, say, Wheeling, West Virginia. One time I went in, and I think it was 10 bucks apiece to get laid. They were only making 40 bucks a week. I handled all the money. So the one kid wanted to get fucked a second time. I said, 'You just got laid—you're not gonna be able to get it up.' Yeah, yeah, yeah. 'I'm in love with this fuckin' broad.' So I made a deal with the madam: 'He wants to go a second time.' She said, 'O.K., give me eight dollars.' He went back up to the room, and we're all waiting. The madam came and said, 'Look, he's gotta be outta there very shortly.' We're still waiting. The madam comes and she says, 'I'm getting him out of here.' She goes upstairs. I hear a commotion, yelling and screaming. He doesn't wanna leave until he gets a hard-on. She comes back down, she calls the cops. The cops come, and they almost pinch us because it was protected. He wants his money back, the eight bucks. I said, 'Fuck you and your fucking money—let's get out of here.'"

As immensely successful as it was, "At the Hop" was pretty much the end as well as the beginning of Danny and the Juniors. When Blavat came off the road with them for the last time, in 1960, they were fading fast; Danny Rapp would

AT THE HOP

Clockwise from top: Philly D.J. Jerry Blavat (in tux) in 1967; Danny and the Juniors, whom Blavat had road-managed ("I used to get them laid"); Dick Clark, who took over *American Bandstand* in 1956 after the original host was accused of having sex with a minor.

go on to commit suicide in the spring of 1983, aged 41. In 1960, however, Jerry was just getting started.

"There was this nightclub in South Philadelphia called the Venus. And, remember, this is when rock 'n' roll is not being featured in clubs. I mean, this was a lounge where wiseguys would go and drink and pick up broads and things like that. I mean, it was the Venus Lounge in South Philadelphia. So I had just made a score coming off the road. I think I had, like, 800 bucks, and I started to shoot craps at 17th and Mifflin with the older guys. And Don Pinto, who owned the club, was there. Guys were making bets. One guy says to Pinto, 'Yeah, he can help ya. What do you need?' He said, 'I'm gonna do a radio show out of my club.' This guy said, 'The kid can do it.' I said, 'Yeah, I'll do a radio show.' So Don said, 'I'll bet you on the next fuckin' throw you can't do it.' I said, 'Don't bet your money on the fuckin' throw, 'cause you're gonna lose. I can do a radio show from your club.' He rolls, he lost. He didn't get the fuckin' number. So he says, 'Bad



day.' I say, 'I'm gonna make it up to you. You're gonna see, I'm gonna do a radio show.' I went up to WCAM in Camden. I said to the general manager there, 'I wanna buy an hour's worth of time.

What would it cost me?' He said, 'A hundred dollars.' I said, 'O.K. How long?' He said, 'Thirteen-week contract.' I got him \$1,300, and I had the contract. I went back to Don Pinto and his partners at the Venus. I said, 'Look, I'll do an hour's radio show. I want you to give me 120 bucks.' I then went out and I sold 15-minute blocks. Freihof bread, 60 bucks. Crisconi Oldsmobile, 60 bucks. Dale Dance Studios, 60 bucks. Seven Up, 60 bucks. I made \$240, and I had \$120 from the club. Whoever comes through—Tallulah Bankhead, Rocky Graziano—I interview them at the club. Then one day a snowstorm hits the city, closes down the club. I owned the radio time. So I took my records up to Camden and started to play that music. The snow kept coming down, the kids were off from school"—he snaps his fingers: dual double-finger snaps, the loudest snapping known to man—"and that was that."

So came to be the Geator with the



Ewart G. Abner, who ran Vee-Jay Records, was so cool he wore velour jumpsuits when everyone else was wearing suits and ties.

around, and we all hang out, have drinks, and you look like a cool guy—you can come.' I was white and they were black. I would go every Friday to that Avenue Motel, and, man, I'm telling you..." Freddy shakes his head; there are no words. "Abner drank Johnnie Walker Black straight up, and so I drank Johnnie Walker Black straight up. With a soda chaser."

Heater, keeper of the flame and coolest of the cool.

Thirty-eight years is a long time, and Blavat and DeMann have seen a lot of things come and go, a lot of things go and come through those years, including themselves, a few times over.

Sitting with Jerry in New York, Freddy after a while seems to slough the skin of Los Angeles, where he has for so long lived and worked as a manager and label executive. It is as if a breeze from Brooklyn, a breeze of the past, reclaims him. They reminisce about the days and characters gone.

They were days of naïveté and exuberance: the sweet and celibate two-straws-and-a-milk-shake songs of Paul & Paula, the Singing Nun rising to the top of the pop charts. And, beneath it all, as Juggy Gayles had put it: booze, bribes, and broads.

Well, the Singing Nun is gone. She OD'd on pills in a suicide pact with another woman in the spring of 1985. But it's not the Singing Nun that these guys miss.

"Yeah, Abner was the best," muses Jerry.

"In New York, when I first broke in, there was a little ring of whores that everyone knew," says Freddy. That was the way it was. Some took their bribery in the currency of flesh, and for others it was both money and broads. "I was always on the lookout, you know, who's gonna hook me up. When I went to Chicago, I got the names of three people to call for whores, and that was mandatory. Well, actually, he gave me one name and he gave me the name of Abner. I went to see Abner, just to say, 'Hi, I'm new in town.' And he said, 'O.K., here, you need some whores?' I said, 'Yeah.' 'Here's three, call them and use my name. And meet me every Friday night at the Avenue Motel. We have a bunch of guys coming

They're talking about Ewart G. Abner Jr., who ran Vee-Jay Records, a company that had been founded in Gary, Indiana, in 1953, by Vivian Carter and her husband, James Bracken—Vee for V. Carter, Jay for J. Bracken—and had moved to Chicago in 1954. From the beginning—Vee-Jay's first release, by the Spaniels, a quintet formed at Roosevelt High School in Gary, established the group as one of the leading doo-wop acts of the Midwest—the company was one of the most powerful of the independents, strong in the full spectrum of R&B, from the Spaniels to the Dells, and from Jimmy Reed to John Lee Hooker. In 1963, under Ewart Abner—who, with the benison of Carter and Bracken, was the guiding force of the label—Vee-Jay became the Beatles' first American label. It was Blavat, the year before, who had convinced Abner that Vee-Jay could prosper with white artists as well as black, bringing him a quartet of Italian-American kids from New Jersey, the Four Seasons, who had a song called "Sherry," which became a No. 1 pop hit and a No. 1 R&B hit for Vee-Jay in 1962.

Abner was so cool that he wore velour jumpsuits when everyone else was wearing suits and ties.

He died two days after Christmas of 1997, aged 74. How I would love to have included the words of that voice, so recently but forever lost. I mean, damn, *velour* jumpsuits.

"I got him to pick up 'Sherry' at the 1962 convention, down in Miami, at the Fontainebleau. Association of Record Merchandisers," says Blavat. "I was with Morris Levy. I bump into Bob Crewe, who I knew forever. He wrote 'Silhouettes.' He says, 'I want you to hear something I just cut with these kids. It's a song called "Sherry."' I hear it. I said, 'I think this fuckin' thing's a hit.' I play it for Morris; he says, 'That's the worst piece of shit I've ever heard.' I say, 'Crewe, don't get discouraged.' Now, Abner loves me for my ear, O.K.? Between 'He Will Break Your Heart,' by Jerry Butler, which I busted wide

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Vee-Jay



open for him, between this, that, the other thing—I mean, God gave me an ear. I take Crewe up to Abner's suite. Abner hears it. He says, 'You know, Geator, I think you got something here. But it's a white artist.' I said, 'Abner, who the fuck knows the difference on an acetate or a record if it's white or black? If a hit's a hit, it's got no fuckin' color, man.' They make a deal. I've got this kid with me who works for me in Philly. He's an orphan, maybe 15 or 16 years old. Crewe wants to celebrate. I say, 'This kid's never been laid—let's get him a hooker.' I go downstairs. Three hours later, I go back to the room. There's broads and characters all over the place, and there's this kid swapping spits with this fuckin' hooker that's been blowing everybody. He's naked, he's got a sheet around him: it's like a Roman orgy. He says, 'I'm in love.' I said, 'Forget about it.' The kid said, 'Why? She loves me.' I said, 'She's a hooker.' The kid turns white: 'No.' I have a drink in my hand. He spins around, goes to hug me from behind, I go down on the bed, the glass shatters, there's blood all over, the kid faints, they rush me to St. Joseph's. Forty-two stitches."

It was some convention. Freddy: "I remember that pussy-eating contest. What was his name? He was fairly short, chubby. It was Atlantic Records that he worked for. He and this other guy, this local promotion man out of Philadelphia."

Jerry: "The guy from Atlantic used to don a robe and come out like a fighter. I don't remember if it was how many they could do, or how long they could do it, or what."

"It was how long it would take for them to get the broads off."

"It was a spectacle. People were laying bets."

But with promotion men involved, suspicions of pay-for-play pseudo-orgasms



were not to be dismissed out of hand.

"But I'm telling you," Jerry says, "it had to be for real." He adds: "I'm gonna tell you exactly when this convention was. My wife was pregnant with my second child. Stacey was born June the 27th. This convention was, like, June the 20th, because I didn't wanna go home, because I knew Patty was due any day, and I didn't wanna really . . ."

"Yeah, it's where everyone made the deals to get records played."

It was a time, all right. But as Heraclitus, greatest of pre-Socratic promotion men, long ago said: Nothing abides.

By 1980, when the gladiatorial cun-linguists had many years since hung up their robes, the Geator with the Heator looked like he was down for the count: busted on weapons charges, and then arrested 10 months later for allegedly trying to run over a cop who was directing traffic at a road-construction site.

They All Sang on the Corner. So the title of a book about doo-wop, written more than a quarter of a century ago, by Philip Groia. It is a title that captures and expresses much. For, from the beginning, rock 'n' roll was of the corner: those four corners of Blavat's youth, and the countless corners of countless youths. Rock 'n' roll,

With promotion men involved, suspicions of pay-for-play pseudo-orgasms were not to be dismissed out of hand.

in all its innocence, in all its wickedness, was, from the beginning, of the neighborhood.

And as the Church comprises many churches, so the neighborhood—I cannot capitalize that initial *n* no matter how strongly effect and meaning entice me to do so, for, here, to exalt the word would be to misrepresent the thing—comprises neighborhoods beyond number. This is not an idle analogy: the neighborhood is, or was, the embodiment of a spiritual ethos as supernal and puissant in reality as that of the Church in theory. As every neighborhood was a parish, and every parish was a neighborhood, so together they have died.

The true gauge of the freedom of any community is the measurement of the degree of equality with which the fruits of malfesance are shared by the rulers and the ruled, the cop on the beat and the man or woman on the street. The essence of democracy, as of capitalism, is corruption. Only when the criminal in blue and the criminal in mufti, the peddler and the priest, and the alderman and the drunkard—only when they are neighbors of common root and conspira-

cy is any neighborhood safe for the old lady on the stoop on a hot summer night; only then is there true charity, only then is there a justice that is real, and only then is there life in the air. As the social clubs close, so the churches empty. This is fact, not metaphor.

These may sound to some like words beyond good and evil, but not to one who was neighborhood-born. Blavat was from the neighborhood. He was from the old school. But the walls of the old school came tumbling down.

Angelo Bruno, the Philadelphia boss who since Jerry's childhood had treated him with the love of a father, was murdered on March 21, 1980, reputedly in a killing arranged by his so-called *consigliere*, Antonio "Tony Bananas" Caponigro, who himself did not see the end of that year. Caponigro's naked body, tortured and mutilated, was found in a garbage bag in the South Bronx. Stuck up his dead asshole were \$20 bills, not quite the deserts of avarice that the decedent had envisioned. Phil Testa, who had overseen this justice, took control, but his rule was not long. In March of 1981, pieces of him were blown into the street by a bomb planted on the porch of his South Philly home.

The murder of Angelo Bruno was when the walls of the neighborhood came tumbling down. It was not until after Bruno's death that Blavat, in February of 1981, was brought to trial for his alleged 1979 "aggravated assault" on the cop. The only thing that would have made this more bizarre would have been if he had not been acquitted. "I'll tell you about that cop they said I tried to run over," Jerry says. "First of all, he was an off-duty cop. He showed



RADIO DAYS

From left: Jerry Blavat ("the Geator with the Heator") taping a show in 1966; the funeral of Philadelphia Mob boss and Blavat friend Angelo Bruno, 1980; the Four Seasons' "Sherry," which Blavat took to Vee-Jay and for which he refused to take a cut.



"Music was different. There was honor among thieves. Now there isn't. There's nothing to hang your hat on these days."

no sign of being a cop. He never identified himself as such. He showed no I.D." The cop disputed this at trial, but Jerry goes on: "The punch line is, the way this guy asks me to halt is he throws a flashlight at my head. You know the deal. You give some guy a badge, and..." Jerry's voice trails off mildly, as if there is no reason to reiterate universal truth. To this day he is not sure if the decision to prosecute him originated with federal agents, desperately seeking a rat to cast light, no matter how slight, on the baffling tumult that now embroiled the Philadelphia underworld, or with the state of New Jersey, which seemed intent on putting him out of business for motives upon which he can only speculate, involving

state officials who cannot here be named.

Jerry had been doing good before his legal troubles waylaid his career. He had been spreading the old-time religion to converts, laying down that lean, mean music to those who had been following him for years. He was on radio. He was on television. He promoted shows. He had music stores, the Record Museums. He owned a club, Memories, in Margate, New Jersey. He was a partner in the best of the early oldies labels, Lost Nite, reissuing, with the help of Ewart Abner and Morris Levy, some of the finest recordings of the 50s. Most of his income came from hosting shows—no, "hosting" is not the right word. The Geator *performed*. I have heard of mercury poisoning. To experience the Geator in action was, and is, to witness what might be called adrenaline poisoning.

If you talk to every survivor of the days of pay-for-play innocence and of experience, among all the names bandied about, in malice or in joy or in both, Blavat's is one of the few that remain unsullied. He never took, they say. He was his own man, who had the wits and the ways to make it his way. Even when he got Crewe and Abner together, bring-

ing about one of the biggest hits in the history of Vee-Jay, he refused the points that were offered him for "Sherry": a perfectly legitimate and legal offer that he chose simply not to accept.

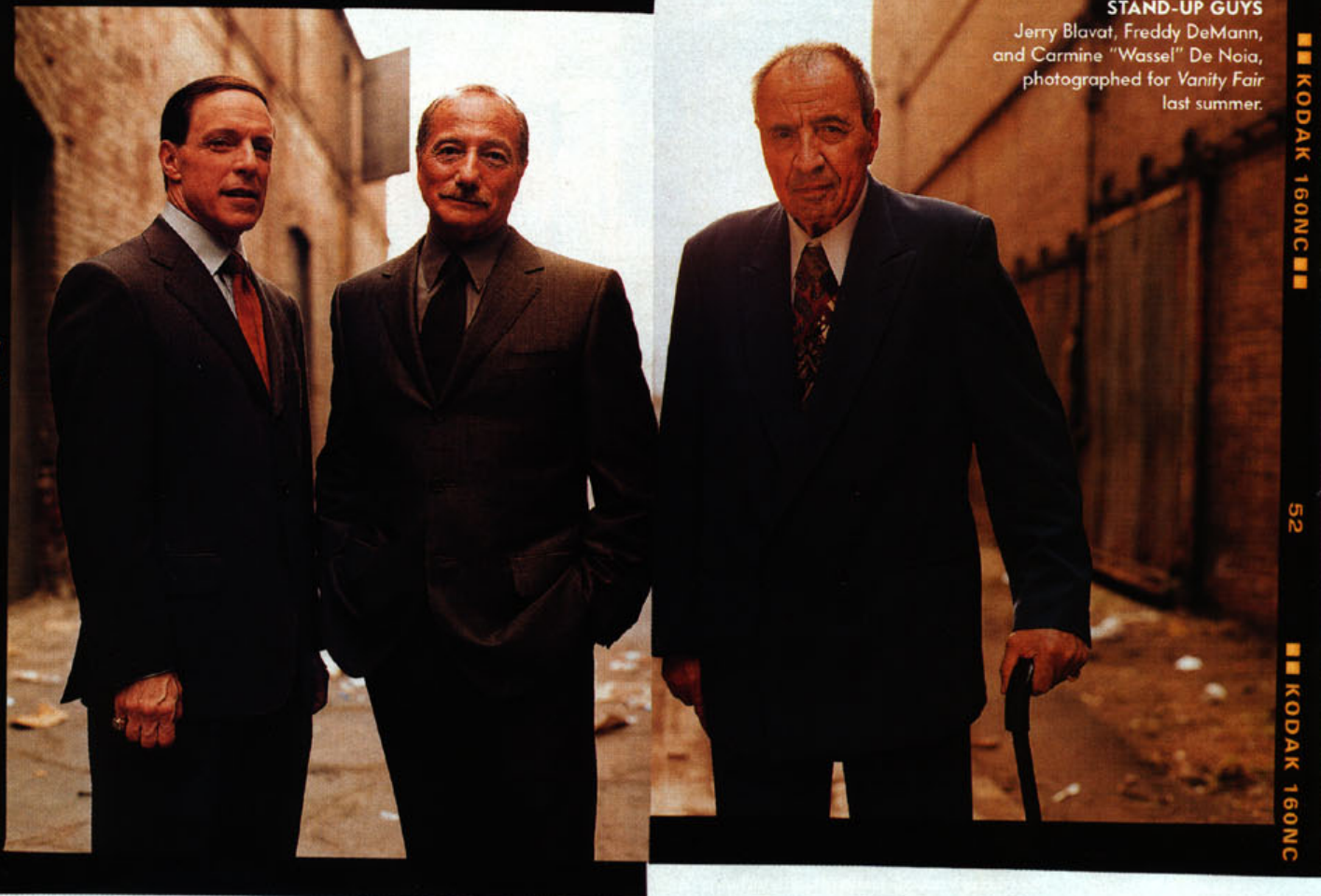
"That's the difference between you and Dick Clark," says Freddy DeMann when this matter is broached.

"He took everything." Jerry smiles. "Even today he takes everything." Jerry shrugs. "God bless him."

He loved Crewe, he says. He loved Abner. He loved the record. He was making a fortune as it was. He never wanted to be beholden or have his freedom endangered, and that was that.

Jerry's not down anymore. He brought himself back up, starting over as he had started out after that crap game way back when: buying time, selling blocks on WCAM. Today he's broadcasting over five different radio stations heard in southern Jersey, Philadelphia, and Delaware, and doing shows on WQED, a Pittsburgh PBS channel. He's still got his club in Margate. That adrenaline is rushing as wild as ever. He hosts live shows and what he still calls "record hops," tak-

BLAVAT AND DEMANN STYLED BY VINCENT BOUCHER; DE NOIA STYLED BY KIM MEEHAN; BLAVAT'S SUIT AND TIE BY REMENEGILDO ZEGNA; SHIRT BY BARNEY'S NEW YORK; DEMANN'S SUIT BY GUCCI; SHIRT BY HUGO BOSS; TIE BY REMENEGILDO ZEGNA. FOX DETAILS, SEE CREDITS PAGE



STAND-UP GUYS

Jerry Blavat, Freddy DeMann, and Carmine "Wassel" De Noia, photographed for *Vanity Fair* last summer.

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ing down up to \$1,600 for a weeknight gig, \$2,500 to \$3,500 for a weekend night.

And if I had half of Freddy DeMann's money, I tell him, I'd burn mine. Yet even Freddy, sitting there shed of his L.A. skin, gives the impression that there were joys back there, in those days before truly big money, that have not returned.

"Phil Kronfeld's men's shop," he recalls wistfully. It was where the *crème de la cool* bought their threads. "I was making \$50 a week or something like that, looking through that store window. I dreamed that someday I could afford to go in there and get a suit like the rest of those guys. That sharkskin suit and that silk tie, man. I had to have it. I had to do it."

Blavat has his own wistfulness. I don't even know if he and DeMann are hearing each other's words, or hearing merely the wistfulness.

"I'm having coffee one morning at my place with Blinky"—Jerry's talking about Blinky Palermo, the Philadelphia-based prince of the fight rackets under the lordship of Frankie Carbo—"and the phone rings. It's Sinatra. He calls me Matchstick; that's what he always called me. 'Where's the raviolis?' Blah, blah, blah. I said, 'My mother's making the raviolis. They'll be there by six, all right?' So Blinky's with me. He says, 'Who was that?' I said it was Sinatra. He says, 'That bum. I haven't seen him in—' I said, 'Well, I'm going over with the raviolis and the meatballs and the sausage. Come back at 5:30. We'll get the limo and we'll go and you'll say hello to Sinatra.' Sure enough, he comes back. We get in the limo with the raviolis, the meatballs, the sausage, and we go see Frankie." For a moment, it's not the past: "Frank loves my mother's raviolis. Because she's *abruzzese*. They're the best cooks."

"Hell," says DeMann, "later on, when I was a manager, you know how many guys approached me? I remember there was a guy came in with a suitcase full of cash when I represented the Jackson 5. He wanted to be the promoter of a tour the Jacksons were going to do. I said, 'Ah, come on, you're broke. I hear you're broke.' 'Here, here, here'—he's pulling bundles out of the case."

"Was he a successful promoter?" I ask.

"He was. He did a lot of national tours, and then went to jail for tax evasion or something, I don't know."

No, the two of them agree, *payola* never died. It just became a drag.

"Payola today," says DeMann, "goes on in a much bigger way. Now the stations absolutely hold you up. KISS in Boston, KISS in L.A., they're doing a big summer show, or their Christmas show, and it's 'Here's the act we want.' And

you better supply them or they won't play your record. They don't say it, but that's what they mean." Freddy shakes his head, waves aside the current music business and its million-dollar corporate shakedowns, while Jerry turns back to the days when the racket was exciting. "Who pulled the line, who wasn't gonna pull the line. Who got paid. I'm telling ya, it was incredible. The record business was like a Damon Runyon thing, but with people who knew nothing about the record business."

And all the while, the kids dancing, aswirl, their own pulses singing, never knowing, never hearing, the beat beneath the beat.

"Music was different," says DeMann. "The Mafia was different. There was honor among thieves. Now there isn't any. There's nothing. There's nothing to hang your hat on these days."

Another day. I'm in New York with Wassel, Hy Weiss, and other characters. Freddy is gone back to L.A., but these guys are saying what he said in their own ways.

"Dead, all of it," somebody says.

"They took away the prize."

"Yeah," as Wassel says, intoning agreement with nothing, but merely dismissal. "No more stand-up guys anymore." It is a once common complaint, heard ever more rarely, testimony perhaps of its increasing truth. "This city's dead," says someone else. "This guy, this mayor, this *faccia di morte* here, he's . . ." The speaker shakes his head, not for want of words, but in disgusted velleity.

Wassel hasn't been to jail in a while. I tell him of an arrest less than a year ago: the first time I was ever in a cell without a single obscenity scrawled on the walls. The walls were filled with only two phrases, in a hundred hands, a hundred intensities: KILL RUDY and DIE RUDY DIE. The notion seems to please all at the table, and inspires Wassel to speak again.

"Yeah"—same tone. "People say this guy's like Mussolini. They say he's like Hitler. I tell 'em no. Mussolini and Hitler had friends."

Even Hy Weiss grins. Then he leans forward, softly says, "You know why the government will never get the music business? It's because they could never understand how it works. And you know why that is? It's because the people in the music business have never understood how it works."

Then Hy Weiss, a boyish gleam in his 77-year-old eyes, returns quite calmly to his eggs and his coffee and his silence.

Rock on, Hymie, rock on. □