Mar. 21, 1952—at the Cleveland Arena:

The first rock festival

Part I

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By Fred McGunagle

Alan Freed

Remember Alan Freed, the King of the Moondogs? Brace yourself for this:

He may have been a significant figure in American musical history.

An Englishman named Charlie Gillett has written a book called "The Sound of the City; the Rise of Rock and Roll" (Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, $6.95, paperback $2.50).

In it he makes a pretty good case for treating rock and roll as more than a teen-age fad of the 1950's. Along the way he also presents a new view of Freed.

TO CLEVELANDERS who remember him, Alan Freed was a raucous, fast-talking disc jockey whose principal claim to fame was causing a near-riot when he oversold the Arena for a rock and roll dance.

Some may also remember that he later went on to a meteoric national career—a career ended by the payola scandals of 1959. He died in California in 1965 at age 45.

According to Gillett, Freed was the man who helped launch a revolution in popular music and the "Moondog Coronation Ball" of 1952 was the key event.

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In the early 1950's, says Gillett, American popular music was locked in the grip of a powerful establishment dominated by the six major record companies and their allies in ASCAP (the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers).

With all the well known singers tied up in long-term contracts, the companies had a vested interest in the musical status quo. Their A & R men (artists and repertory) decided what music people would hear — in other words, Guy Mitchell, Kitty Kallen and Patti Page singing ballads and an occasional novelty.

A FEW INDEPENDENT producers were scattered around the country, but they had no means of national distribution and had to scrape by with the two specialty markets — country and western, and rhythm and blues (earlier known as race music).

Enter Alan Freed.

Freed was a struggling disk jockey on WJW in 1951 when he got a call from Leo Mintz of Record Rendezvous, one of his sponsors, asking him to come to the store.

As Gillett tells it:

"MINTZ WAS INTRIGUED by the musical taste of some of the white adolescents who bought records at his store, and Freed was amazed by it. He watched the excited reaction of the youths who danced energetically as they listened to music that Freed had previously considered alien to their culture, rhythm and blues."

Freed talked WJW into giving him a chance to play what he called "rock and roll" (the terms go back into the history of Negro blues but apparently had not been used as a classification before; Mintz later claimed credit for inventing the phrase).

"Moondog's Rock and Roll Party" was a success. But nobody realized how much of a success until Mar. 21, 1952, the night of the Moondog Coronation Ball.

(Gillett erroneously lists the date as 1953. Freed once told Earl Wilson in an interview that it was 1951. But newspaper clippings show it was 1952.)

"Police Capt. William Zimmerman was forced to call for 30 extra firemen and 40 extra police as the rowdy crowd broke down the doors when ticket sales were

THE MOONDOG BALL — This was the scene Sunday, Mar. 21, 1952 when 21,000 peopled overflowed the Arena. Note the wide brims and maxi-coats of the era. Look familiar?

stopped. The lobby mob began swelling, and three doors were smashed, with firemen estimating that 7000 then rushed in through the burst panels."

Firemen estimated the mob at 21,000 — more than twice the capacity of the Arena. Apparently at least 14,000 tickets had been sold. One man was stabbed in the melee. Five persons were arrested. Traffic had to be detoured on Euclid and Chester Aves. when police cleared the building.

The Fire Department wanted Freed arrested, but couldn't find a law under which to charge him. Council shortly afterward passed an ordinance making it illegal to oversell a dance.

THE EVENT — reported around the country — drew the attention of the music moguls to the impact of this new — to them — kind of music. Freed's show was soon syndicated and in 1954 he went to WINS, New York with a lucrative contract.

Soon he was staging rock and roll shows around the country — often despite threats of arrest by city officials who feared the disturbances that sometimes accompanied them.

The major record companies, no longer able to ignore rock and roll, tried at first to get by with "cover versions" of songs that looked like hits.

That meant that when an independent-produced record started up the charts somebody like Pat Boone or the McGuire Sisters would quickly make a similar version that usually outsold the original.

FORCED AT LAST to admit that rock and roll was more than a fad, the major producers began buying up contracts of the best know singers. RCA made headlines when it paid the then fabulous sum of $30,000 for Elvis Presley.

The song-writing stables were put to work on rock and roll-type songs, and by the late 1950's their mass-produced output had become the standard pop music.

And that, to Gillett, was the tragedy. As he sees it, 1954 and 1955 were the Golden Age of rock and roll, before the field was "plundered" by the major producers.

The early stars — Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Presley, Bill Haley, Little Richard, Bo Diddley — were alive and vibrant, unlike the insipid crooners who preceded them. Their music was a refreshing spring bursting forth from the underground mainstream of America.

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WHETHER THEY were musical pioneers or just fast-buck artists, Moondog and his colleagues of the early '50's had left a legacy, a musical genre that flourished and then died.

And yet, it hadn't died completely.

For in England in the early '60's, a subculture was growing of young people disenchanted with the world of their elders. Young musicians listened to the records of Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley and were led by them back into the rich American heritage of urban and rural blues.

And some of them began performing in basement clubs. They called themselves by strange names, like the Animals, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles.