Rock & Roll ... From The Beginning

It all started so quietly that no one really knew that it had begun (years later everyone knew). Even the record companies who made the hits that started it all were unaware that they were starting a trend that would last through three decades. Rock & roll was not anyone's hype; it happened because the kids made it happen; youth led and their elders followed.

Rock & roll did not burst full bloom on the record scene in the mid-1950s; it evolved gradually from rhythm & blues, starting back in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This was a period of violent change in pop music. The big bands had disappeared, jazz had started its withdrawal into a cult phenomenon; Mitch Miller (remembered more now for his sing-a-longs) was "revolutionizing" pop with new sounds, new gimmicks and new young talent. Country music was changing, too (at least lyrically), spurred by the genius of Hank Williams.

But it was in the r&b field that the greatest changes were in the making. Until World War II r&b was dominated by the three major firms (RCA Victor, Columbia-Okeh, Decca-Brunswick), a position they gave up during the war due to shortages of shellac for 78 rpm records, Post-war they concentrated mainly on pop and country music. Into this vacuum moved a number of young, aggressive and highly talented individuals who started their own independent r&b labels. They

There was a wild arrangement featuring an oboe or a cello. From time to time there were duets with a leading female and male r&b star. But always, no matter what, there was that big, big beat.

Growing R&B Audience

By the early 1950s there was a considerable group of best-selling r&b artists with substantial followings. They included Louis Jordan, Dinah Washington, Arthur Crudup, Roy Milton, the Ravens, Sonny Til & the Orioles, the Five Keys, the Spaniels, Ivory Joe Hunter, Wynonie Harris, Memphis Slim, Jimmy Witherspoon, Big Maybelle, John Lee Hooker, Big Jay McNeely, Amos Milburn, Charles Brown, Johnny Otis, Little Esther, Lowell Fulson, Fats Domino, Roy Brown, Tiny Bradshaw, Ray Charles, Muddy Waters, Joe Turner, Billy Ward and the Dominoes (including Clyde McPhatter and Jackie Wilson), Howlin' Wolf, Percy Mayfield, Ruth Brown and B. B. King.

The following that these artists had, with rare exceptions like Louis Jordan and Dinah Washington, was primarily black. Basically records by these artists were made for the black audience and most of their sales were in black markets. Few downtown stores carried r&b records.

What was true of stores was also true of radio. Few pop stations ever played r&b records. They would play records by artificial stars such as Nat King Cole, Billy Eckstine, etc., as long as the artist sang pop material, but hardly ever if the artist sang r&b tunes. Louis Jordan, with his novelty-type songs, or novelty hits like "Open the Door, Richard," did get pop play. But little else.

There was one way whites, as well as blacks, could get to hear r&b records. That was through r&b stations which usually broadcast only r&b with occasional spins of pop records by soul brothers like Cole and Eckstine. It may have been difficult for a white youngsters to get to a ghetto area to buy r&b records, but there was no problem in tuning into a radio station. Every large city had them. They were usually white-owned but the disc jockeys, newsmen and occasionally, the program directors, were black. Since the station was black market, the deejays could play all of the r&b records they chose.

White youngsters did tune in. Not a lot of them in 1950, but many. More in 1951, and still more in 1952. They tuned in for almost the same reason that white kids tuned into independent (non-network) stations in the 1930s to hear music by bands like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw and the Dorsey Brothers. They couldn't hear the big bands on the network stations and swing bands had the guts and the beat that the kids wanted. In the 1950s the white kids wanted the beat of r&b. They wanted the beat because the pop music scene was very pale, Morley and Miller and his stable of young artists at Columbia Records were creating the most exciting pop sounds around. But to a music listener of 13, it's understandable that "Come On-A My House" or "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Clause" did not have the same impact as "Night Train" or "Good Lovin'." By 1953-54 there was a considerable group of white youngsters throughout the country who dug r&b, who listened to it on r&b stations and who purchased r&b records whenever they could find them. The pop music scene was ripe for revolution. All it needed was a leader. A leader came out of the West... from Cleveland, of all places.

Enter Alan Freed

Alan Freed was a disc jockey at radio station WJW in Cleveland in the early 1950s. He was a local disc jockey, i.e., Count Basie, Tony Bennett. His show had no particular rating and at that moment in his life Freed was an unlikely choice to lead the r&b revolution. One day he came across a record shop that carried r&b hits. He was struck by the fact that so many young white kids were buying r&b discs. He decided to use a few of them on his show.