

Alan Freed, the influential and controversial DJ who helped bring rock'n'roll to the world

Seventy years ago this March, a revolutionary concert was being promoted around Cleveland. But when the Moondog Coronation Ball ended in violence and rioting, rock'n'roll's reputation as a danger to society was truly born...

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

TEENAGE

**MOONDOG
CORONATION BALL
CLEVELAND ARENA**
3717 EUCLID AVENUE - CLEVELAND, OHIO
FRIDAY NITE, MAR. 21
10 P.M. to 2 A.M.

IN PERSON FEATURING THESE SENSATIONAL STARS IN PERSON

PAUL WILLIAMS ★ **TINY GRIMES**
HUCKLEBUCKERS ROCKIN' HIGHLANDERS

THE DOMINOES ★ **DANNY COBB**

MANY OTHERS! ★ **VARETTA DILLARD** ★ **MANY OTHERS!**

THE MOONDOG RADIO SHOW
WITH **ALAN FREED** IN PERSON
BROADCAST OVER WJW DIRECT FROM THE BALL

THE MOST TERRIBLE BALL OF THEM ALL! THE MOST TERRIBLE BALL OF THEM ALL!

Adv. Sale Tickets \$1.50 Including All Taxes Adm. at Door \$1.75
TICKETS NOW ON SALE IN CLEVELAND AT RECORD RENDEZVOUS, 200 PROSPECT
AND AT RICHMAN'S AND THE ARENA BOX OFFICE
ALSO AT MANY LEADING RECORD SHOPS IN OTHER NORTHERN OHIO CITIES

The date is 21 March 1952 and outside Cleveland's imposing 9,950-seater Arena a crowd has formed. The Moondog Coronation Ball has been hyped at "the most terrible ball of them all!", but, due to a printing error, more people have turned up than its organisers planned for.

Thousands of teenagers have pulled up outside Cleveland Arena, eager to bop'n'jive to the R&B bands they've only ever heard on the radio. But with just under a thousand hepcats already inside, the remaining fans are getting angry. "Let us in, let us in!" the mob chant as they slam and bang on the doors of 3717 Euclid Avenue. Eventually, the

RECORD

Leo Mintz poses outside his shop, Record Rendezvous, at 300 Prospect Avenue, Cleveland

RENDEZVOUS

300



RAMPAGE

glass is smashed and a cheer erupts as the horde storm the building. The police, headed up by Captain William Zimmerman, are shoved aside like rag dolls by the rampaging teens, so hungry are they to rock and roll the night away.

The Ball has been called 'the Big Bang of rock'n'roll'. And for good reason. It was the world's very first rock'n'roll concert, and, even if it had gone smoothly and all those acts – from Paul Williams and The Hucklebusters, to Tiny Grimes and the Rocking Highlanders, to The Dominoes and Varetta Dillard – had actually managed to do their thing, we'd likely still be talking

about it now. But that it climaxed in such chaos (accounts vary as to how soon the police ordered the bands to stop. Some say Paul Williams was sent off stage after just one song, others, like journalist Valena Williams, claim it ended soon after Tiny Grimes walked on) has only cemented its reputation as the fiery birth of rock'n'roll.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THIS EPOCHAL EVENT were laid the year before when Cleveland record-store owner Leo Mintz approached radio DJ Alan Freed about playlisting some of the R&B platters that he'd noticed were becoming

increasingly popular in his shop. Swapping the light classical pieces he'd been used to spinning for what was then termed 'race music', but what Freed swiftly christened 'rock'n'roll', proved a masterstroke.

That term 'rock'n'roll' wasn't new, of course – since the 1920s, it had been a oft-used euphemism for either dancing or sex, with Trixie Smith's 1922 blues ballad *My Man Rocks Me (With One Steady Roll)* typifying its meaning for the next 30 years. But Freed's continued use of the phrase during his radio show certainly popularised it as the catch-all term that encompassed the R&B and hyped-up country he was ➔

MOONDOG CORONATION BALL: THE NEXT GENERATION

Despite the first Moondog Coronation Ball ending almost as soon as it began, that hasn't stopped various promoters throughout the years capitalising on its name. The first revival happened in 1992, when radio personality John Gorman organised Moondog Coronation Ball '92, booking Paul Williams, 40 years on from that first concert. Since then, the Ball has been held regularly, featuring a wide range of rock and soul acts such as Smokey Robinson (pictured), Randy Bachman, Mark Lindsay, BJ Thomas, Tommy James, Three Dog Night and Grand Funk Railroad.

Speaking about that first revival ball in '92, Gorman said: "We're not trying to copy the first ball, but put a strong show together to commemorate it." It has to be said that none of this new run of Moondog Celebration Balls have finished the way the original did 70 years ago, with the end of the millennium's Woodstock '99 coming the closest to the original ball's chaotic end.



playing to his listeners. And if his show was proving popular, let's not ignore Freed's personal contribution to all this. Previously a sportscaster, he brought all that zest and zing to his music show, regularly ringing cowbells and howling when he found a record he loved. To his listeners, Alan Freed was as hip and exhilarating as the revved-up blues he was playing.

With Freed's programme now insanely popular, he and Mintz hit upon an idea – what about staging a live dance event showcasing some of the artists whose discs Freed was spinning? Able to advertise it on the radio, they grew increasingly confident that this multi-artist event would be a smash, so much so that they decided on a second date. Only when the tickets were printed, that second date was missing, so those that had been booked in for the first and second gigs turned up together.

Mintz was in Florida that fateful night of 21 March when the phone rang. "There's an emergency, you'd better come home right now!" he was told.

"By the time he arrived there was already a full-blown riot," Mintz's son Stuart told the BBC in 2012. "The fire department opened up hoses on the crowd. He just tapped the cab driver on the shoulder and said, 'Find me a bar.'"

Saxophonist Paul Williams, leader of The

R&B vocal group Billy Ward And His Dominoes



Hucklebuckers, shared top billing on the poster with Tiny Grimes and the Rockin' Highlanders (an African American instrumental outfit that performed, somewhat strikingly, in Scottish kilts). Talking in 1992 to Cleveland's *Plain Dealer*, the then-77-year-old remembered the scene from inside the venue.

"Suddenly I looked up, and the doors seemed to be moving," he told the newspaper. "Just like they were breathing. And by the time we finished that first song, people poured into the Arena like water. The other acts, like The Dominoes, Varetta Dillard and Tiny Grimes, they just didn't get a chance to play before the shoving started."

Williams was probably the biggest draw there that night if only because of his 1949 smash *The Huckle-Buck*. Tiny Grimes and the Rockin' Highlanders, meanwhile, had enjoyed a modest hit with their jazz-fried

interpretation of the Scottish folk standard *The Bonnie Banks O' Loch Lomond*. The Dominoes may have been third billed, but they were to become bigger than either of the headline acts. Counting both Clyde McPhatter and Jackie Wilson among its members, The Dominoes were, in 1952, just two years into their 15-year career and, only 10 months before, had tasted success on the pop chart with their R&B crossover hit *Sixty Minute Man*.

Varetta Dillard, meanwhile, had only recently signed to Savoy when she was invited by Freed to perform at the Coronation Ball. Though she never did take to the stage that night, her career bloomed in the years after, with a succession of 'splatter-platter' tribute discs, including odes to James Dean (*I Miss You, Jimmy*) and Johnny Ace (*Johnny Has Gone*).

Inside, with the artists now having fled

"The fire department opened up hoses on the crowd. [Leo] just tapped the cab driver on the shoulder and said, 'Find me a bar.'"

STUART MINTZ

RECORD RENDEZVOUS

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WJW 850 ON YOUR DIAL

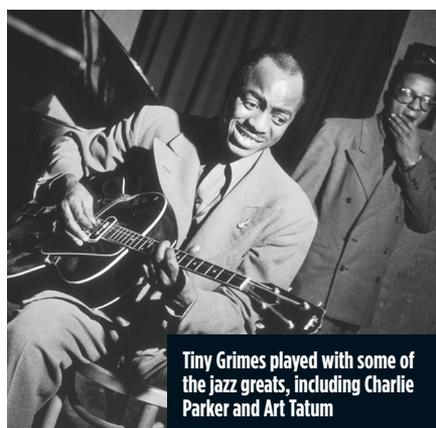


The Record Rendezvous sponsored Alan Freed's popular Moondog rock'n'roll live concerts

the scene, the crowd ran amok, fights had broken out and there were reports of a stabbing. Not only the police but the Cleveland fire department waded in and attempted to disperse the crowd. It took them several hours to clear everyone out.

The next day, Freed addressed the calamity on his WJW radio show. "If anyone," he told his listeners, "had told us that some 20 or 25,000 people would try to get into a *dance*, I suppose you would have been just like me – you would have laughed and said they were crazy."

IN THE AFTERMATH, Freed just about escaped criminal charges. It has to be said, however, that the notoriety of the event did him no harm professionally. Though it made him 'one to watch' on the FBI's list of domestic threats, his popularity amongst



Tiny Grimes played with some of the jazz greats, including Charlie Parker and Art Tatum

the nation's youth soared in the weeks and months after, with WJW offering his rock'n'roll show even more airtime. Almost overnight, Alan Freed had become a nationally known celebrity.

Though Freed's career cratered due to the payola scandal of the late-50s, before his

untimely death aged just 43 from alcohol abuse, his name is now forever wedded to the music he helped popularise. The Cleveland Arena may now be long gone (it was bulldozed in 1977), but the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame museum stands in the same city, and until 2014 Freed's ashes were stored there, a reminder to all those who visited as to who helped spread that revolutionary movement of the 1950s.

In some ways, it barely matters that the Moondog Celebration Ball didn't get to happen. That that many people turned up woke promoters and record labels up to the commercial power of rock'n'roll, laying the foundations for every rock gig thereafter, from Woodstock to Live Aid to Lollapalooza. If rock'n'roll truly has a birthplace, there's a strong argument that it happened at 3717 Euclid Avenue that night of 21 March 1952. ★