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THE ONLY COMMON THREAD:  
RACE, YOUTH, AND THE EVERYDAY REBELLION OF ROCK AND ROLL,  
CLEVELAND, OHIO, 1952-1966

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Bachelor of Arts in Communications  
Lake Erie College  
May, 2006

submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree  
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THE ONLY COMMON THREAD:  
RACE, YOUTH, AND THE EVERYDAY REBELLION OF ROCK AND ROLL,  
CLEVELAND, OHIO, 1952-1966

DANA ARITONOVICH

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a social and cultural history of young people, race relations, and rock and roll music in Cleveland between 1952 and 1966. It explores how the combination of de facto segregation and rock and roll shaped attitudes about race for those coming of age after the Second World War. Population changes during the Second Great Migration helped bring the sound of southern black music to northern cities like Cleveland, and provided fertile ground for rock and roll to flourish, and for racial prejudice to be confronted. Critics blamed the music for violence, juvenile delinquency, and sexual depravity, among other social problems. In reality, the music facilitated racial understanding, and gave black and white artists an outlet through which they could express their hopes and frustrations about their lives and communities. Through the years, the music provided a window into the lives of “the other” that young Americans in a segregated environment might not otherwise experience. The civil rights movement was already creating a national debate about race in American society, but when rock and roll took over the hearts and minds of teenagers across the country the public discourse reached another level.

Original oral histories conducted with music fans, performers, and deejays as well as other Cleveland-specific primary sources provide the basis for my argument about rock and roll’s

black roots providing a cultural education for a generation of music fans, including those who adhered to the racial prejudice of their parents; this cultural education also inspired fear in many adults for the change that a liberalization of racial views and sexual mores brought with it. Rock and roll was carried to the North with the Second Great Migration, and along with technological advances in radio and the recording industry, changed the way music was heard and how Americans perceived one another. As important as rock and roll was to young Americans, however, its influence would only go so far in changing racial attitudes and inspiring new ideas about what American society should be.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

There was an integration problem in...America, a pretty severe problem back then. But there was no [segregation] in music....Kids danced to Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Elvis...Chuck Berry said to me one time... “You know, Carl, we might be doing as much with our music as our leaders in Washington to bring down the barriers.” He was right.<sup>1</sup>

--Carl Perkins

Rock and roll did not start out to break down barriers. It was rhythm and blues; it was soul; it was the expression of the fears and passions and everyday lives of black Americans set to a rousing, thumping, exquisite beat that infected the spirits of millions of teenagers, black and white. It created a sensation much feared by racists, music critics, and parents alike. Rock and roll music was a force unlike anything the world had ever seen. Though its impact was felt in fashion, movies, television, radio, and politics as well as in music, it also influenced the racial attitudes of many listeners and became a generational battleground on the issues of race and tradition. In his study of the early days of rock music in the South, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (2005), Michael Bertrand writes that any thorough analysis of the twentieth-century southern experience “must acknowledge that music, including rock ’n’ roll, affected people and how they saw

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<sup>1</sup> Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 41.



themselves and the world around them.”<sup>2</sup> Certainly this sentiment applies as well to those living outside the South, and includes listeners as well as performers. Cleveland’s ill-fated 1952 Moondog Coronation Ball, hosted by white disk jockey Alan Freed, brought race and music together in controversy when a mostly black group of fans rioted as they tried entering the crowded Cleveland Arena to watch what was later described as the first rock and roll concert. The effects of the Moondog on Cleveland’s music and racial atmosphere may have seemed insignificant to many at the time, but it is a milestone in the formation of concern about the music’s implications regarding young Americans, and it helped set the stage for Cleveland to become known as the home of rock and roll.

This thesis is a social and cultural history of young people, race relations, and rock and roll music in Cleveland between 1952 and 1966. It explores how the combination of de facto segregation and rock and roll shaped attitudes about race for those coming of age after the Second World War. Population changes during the Second Great Migration helped bring the sound of southern black music to northern cities like Cleveland, and provided fertile ground for rock and roll to flourish, and for racial prejudice to be confronted. Critics blamed the music for violence, juvenile delinquency, and sexual depravity, among other social problems. In reality, the music facilitated racial understanding, and gave black and white artists an outlet through which they could express their hopes and frustrations about their lives and communities. Since racism continues to plague American society and Cleveland, according to the 2000 census, is the third most-segregated city in the United States, the music cannot be considered a panacea

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<sup>2</sup> Bertrand, 6.

for all of society's ills.<sup>3</sup> The 1966 Hough riots, which came in the middle of rock and roll's second decade of dominance, are a turning point in Cleveland's political and social history, as the violence, much of it blamed on black youth, forced many black and white Clevelanders to reappraise the progress of civil rights activism in regard to desegregation, poverty, and the elimination of bigotry in society as well as in their own minds. The riots also helped give rise to Cleveland's black power movement which was decidedly more confrontational and active in protecting their communities throughout the last half of the 1960s; this new attitude was being reflected in much of the music of the period, providing a complementary soundtrack for a new era of black pride and activism. Through the years, the music provided a window into the lives of "the other" that young Americans in a segregated environment might not otherwise experience. The civil rights movement was already creating a national debate about race in American society, but when rock and roll took over the hearts and minds of teenagers across the country the public discourse reached another level.

Rock and roll was co-opted by (and later directly marketed to) young people who were able to make decisions about their lives as never before: they drove automobiles; they listened to their own kind of music on car and transistor radios; they had jobs which provided disposable income; they generally stayed in school longer which enabled them to choose their own career paths. The American teenager was at the forefront of a new and improved consumer culture in the 1950s, and the music industry recognized the

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<sup>3</sup> Wendell Cox, "Misreading the Tea Leaves: The Census Bureau's metropolitan-segregation report," *National Review Online*, December 4, 2002, <http://old.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-cox120402.asp> (accessed April 24, 2010); U.S. Bureau of the Census, Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division, *Racial and Ethnic Residential Segregation in the United States: 1980-2000*, Chapter 5, Residential Segregation of Blacks or African Americans: 1980 to 2000, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/resseg/ch5.html> (accessed April 25, 2010). December 6, 2004.

power of the post-war generation. The grassroots efforts of these young Americans, black and white, who listened to the same music, are certainly political in nature even if those music fans did not consider themselves activists in the traditional sense. Future California Senator S.I. Hayakawa said in 1956 that “Integration is not a blueprint drawn up in Washington. It is the daily, uneventful business of whites and Negroes sitting beside each other in a street car or school room, at a work bench or lunch counter, without thinking about it.”<sup>4</sup> That included rock and roll.

The essence of rock opponents’ objections was the fact that black and white kids liked the same music. Since slavery, there has been an unnatural fear on the part of many white men that blacks were savages who would take their white women by force. Even worse, some white women may voluntarily sleep with black men, upsetting what was considered the natural codes of proper white society and sexuality. Once *Brown vs. Board of Education* declared in 1954 that all American schools must be integrated, many whites were alarmed by what they viewed as the potential for miscegenation that integrated schools might bring about. English college president Dr. Cyril Bibby stated in 1962 that at the root of racial prejudice was to sex. “[In] the end it comes to this: would you like your daughter to marry a Negro?”<sup>5</sup> This was the horrifying thought that many white Americans lived with when they witnessed their young daughters swooning over black performers like Little Richard or Chuck Berry.

But more than sexuality was bothering adults about this music. “Music has brought a lot of people together, and it’s changed a lot of the ways that people live,” explains

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<sup>4</sup> Bertrand, 237.

<sup>5</sup> Dan Day, “Real Roots of Prejudice,” *Call and Post*, December 8, 1962.

deejay and Cleveland native Lynn Tolliver, Jr.<sup>6</sup> Simply talking with someone of a different race, religion, or ethnic group encourages a person to look beyond the stereotypes with which they may have been raised, and the fact that young people were beginning to look past physical appearance posed an unprecedented challenge to adults and organized society. “It’s exposure, talking to other people like they’re just other people,” says Sheila Blecman, a native of Elyria, Ohio. “It doesn’t matter what color they are if they like the same music.”<sup>7</sup> Though not every white American was racist, society was segregated, in the North as well as the South, and everyone was expected to maintain the status quo. That meant race mixing, even through friendships, was simply out of the question in most of the country.

Population shifts during the Second Great Migration and technological advances in the music industry enabled many white teenagers in the 1950s to be exposed to black performers for the first time, and they discovered that they loved the same music as black teenagers. Bill Spoon, founder of musical group The Soul Notes, says that there was a “segment of society that didn’t want to have their children or themselves publicly relate to anything that a black person was doing.”<sup>8</sup> As black-inspired music gained popularity with teenagers, this sense of foreboding was faced directly by those who had previously been able to shield their children and themselves from any form of black culture. This is not to say that all white kids were listening to rhythm and blues or rock and roll, but enough of them were attuned to the sound to cause controversy and anger. One white man from the South expressed the outrage of many across the country when he said that the proponents of rock and roll were “brainwashing the adolescent mind” and sought to

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<sup>6</sup> Lynn Tolliver, Jr., telephone interview by author, October 25, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Sheila Blecman, interview by author, Lakewood, Ohio, November 17, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Bill Spoon, telephone interview by author, November 21, 2009.

“tear down the morals of our younger generation, helping to spread the cause of integration.”<sup>9</sup> It seems that some adults were making the connection between rock and roll and integration, even though young fans may not have been thinking so deeply about the issue at first. Where young people saw great music they could share with their friends, many older people perceived a threat to the established order of American society. Soon enough, the fears of adults would come to fruition.

Rock and roll helped black artists and regular black Americans cross racial lines in music and in society. Through the music, whites could glimpse elements of black culture and a more positive image that contradicted the stereotypes many had grown up knowing. This, according to Bertrand, “fostered or forced significant reassessment of the issue of race.”<sup>10</sup> A 1955 *Cash Box* editorial recognized the significant role that music played in social change, specifically in black-white relations in the United States:

The whole movement has broken down barriers which in the ordinary course of events might have taken untold amounts of time to do. How better to understand what is unknown to you than by appreciation of the emotional experiences of other people? And how better are these emotions portrayed than by music?<sup>11</sup>

Little Richard, one of the most popular and controversial artists of the 1950s, also understood the role rock music played in improving race relations. “I’ve always thought that rock ‘n’ roll brought the races together,” he said in his 1984 biography. “Although I was black, the fans didn’t care. I used to feel good about that. Especially being from the South, where you see the barriers, having all these people who we thought hated us, showing all this *love*.”<sup>12</sup> The affection teenagers had for their music idols often translated into friendships with peers who had similar musical tastes. To these young people,

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<sup>9</sup> Bertrand, 54.

<sup>10</sup> Bertrand, 54.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Bertrand, 96-97.

<sup>12</sup> Charles White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard* (New York: Pocket Books, 1984), 70.

sharing music could be the beginning of understanding other things they had in common, regardless of race.

Every generation of teenagers feels an uncontrollable need to aggravate their parents. “Teenagers have always liked stuff their parents couldn’t stand,” *American Bandstand* host Dick Clark told *Time* in 1958.<sup>13</sup> Aside from that sort of typical teenage rebellion, however, these kids were hearing music with lyrics that spoke directly to them, wherever they lived and whatever their race. But unlike the politically charged lyrics that became the norm in the late 1960s, the songs young people in the 1950s responded to had nothing specifically to do with politics or social problems. What initially attracted them to rock and roll was the beat; what kept them coming back for more and gave them a sense of belonging were lyrics about their everyday lives. Girls, cars, and school were common themes in rock songs at the time. The political nature of such music was in its ability to reach millions of people regardless of their background, and in the way it provided a shared experience for young people, a collective moment in their lives that older people would never understand. The Cold War was raging, race wars were being fought every day on American soil, and young people needed an escape from political and social pressures. The music’s early proponents did not intend to bring together black and white, nor did they mean for rock and roll to become the music of teenagers. It was simply music created by black artists who were singing about what they knew. There was no hidden or overt agenda: it was just good music that made people sing and dance. However, opponents who objected to the music’s black heritage turned it into a form of everyday rebellion for fans. The social consciousness that came later was almost a

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<sup>13</sup> “Television: Tall, That’s All,” *Time*, April 14, 1958  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,864277,00.html> (accessed January 12, 2010).

response to the complaints and criticism about the younger generation and their music. White kids understood the sounds and words they heard in rock and roll, and that helped lead many of them to a greater understanding of the black people who performed those songs. This was the danger that racists feared most, the weakening of the status quo that kept whites and blacks separate. Music is an integral part of the human experience, and it at once is born out of society and shapes it. Simple songs about love and being a teenager should not upset the elders of the citizenry. But they seemed to understand where this new musical style might lead, and they were frightened of such change. Out of this seemingly apolitical genre grew a sense of community and responsibility that later provided a forum which allowed artists like James Brown and Marvin Gaye to sing openly about racism, poverty, and war in a way that left no question as to their agenda.

“Race music,” as early rhythm and blues was termed, was music written and performed by black people, for black people. How this musical genre became popular among whites and grew into the most important musical force in history is a story that needs to be told in order to fully understand rock and roll’s evolution as a social impetus. America remained a heavily segregated nation after the Second World War, and the population was shifting as blacks began moving in larger numbers than ever to the cities while whites fled to the suburbs. The racial divide appeared stagnant and was comfortable for the majority of whites, while black Americans continued suffering through Jim Crow indignities and violence in the South, and de facto segregation in the North.

How, then, was rock and roll able to reach across racial barriers and become the powerful entity it was? Blacks and whites alike had enjoyed jazz for decades, and

historian Manning Marable notes that “It cannot be emphasized too strongly that jazz played a powerful role in the cultural education of millions of young blacks and whites” during the late 1940s and 1950s. Rock and roll’s popularity drew from some of those same audiences of blacks and whites who were looking to music for entertainment as well as inspiration, and, like jazz, rock provided a cultural education for its followers that helped design a new atmosphere in which racism and segregation could be effectively contested.<sup>14</sup>

Technological changes in the record and radio industries following the Second World War allowed for more widespread distribution of a variety of musical styles through recordings and radio programming. The creation of Vinylite 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  long-play records and 45 rpm disks in the late 1940s revolutionized the way fans listened to music. The jukebox, not radio, was the primary manner through which new music was broken.<sup>15</sup> The jukebox industry benefitted significantly from the new style of records, as they were now less fragile and took up less space than heavy, brittle 78 rpm disks. In 1946, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) began issuing radio licenses to hundreds of new stations across the United States, and within five years the number of radio stations per market had doubled. The majority of these new stations were owned independently of network affiliation and they used phonograph records, something the major networks shunned.<sup>16</sup> The growing number of stations per market influenced radio programming, and stations had to find a way to distinguish themselves.<sup>17</sup> Previously marginalized

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<sup>14</sup> Bertrand, 43.

<sup>15</sup> Henry LoConti, interview by Mark Durica, November 16, 2005, code 400009, The Center for Public History and Digital Humanities, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio.

<sup>16</sup> Richard A. Peterson, “Why 1955? Explaining the Advent of Rock Music,” *Popular Music* 9, no. 1 (January 1990): 101.

<sup>17</sup> Peterson, 105.



musical genres like country and western or rhythm and blues were now able to find their way to public airwaves because independent stations were willing to play music recorded on smaller labels.

As technology helped disseminate new styles of music to Americans in the years following the war, a sense of normalcy was returning to their everyday lives. For white Americans, that meant returning to jobs and school and opportunity, free of the rationing created by the Great Depression and the war; for black Americans, the racism and poverty they had always experienced had never dissipated, and life was just as complicated as ever. Black veterans often wondered what it was they had fought for overseas, when they were not treated as equal citizens in their own country. Fighting in a segregated military awakened the consciousness of many of these veterans and their families who felt they had been wronged by their nation. President Harry Truman's Executive Order 9981 to desegregate the military *after* the war was too little, too late for some. More action by the government was necessary, but the American people had to take the first steps to create true, lasting change in race relations.

The first fifteen years of rock and roll, from 1952 to 1966, coincide with years of massive upheaval in the social, political, and racial climates in the United States. There is no simple equation to explain why certain music or performers become popular, but post-war America experienced growing pains and a baby boom that created the right circumstances for this music to flourish. The impact of the Second Great Migration cannot be overestimated in the spread of rock and roll and the challenging of racial attitudes in Cleveland and other northern cities. The "story" of my thesis begins with the 1952 Moondog Coronation Ball in Cleveland, historically accepted as the first rock

concert. Cleveland was a segregated city in 1952 and the event, hosted by white disk jockey Alan Freed and produced by white businessmen, was attended by an overwhelmingly black audience. The show had barely begun when a riot broke out and the crowd was dispersed by police officers. Thus began rock music's association with violence. Though the crowd at Freed's first concert was almost entirely black, as were the performers, it is seen by Cleveland disk jockey Bill Randle and other music professionals as the beginning of the acceptance of black popular music, not just by fans but by the music industry as well.<sup>18</sup> 1952 is also the year that saw the first arguments in what would become the landmark *Brown* decision which was supposed to end segregation in schools. Throughout the decade, America was witness to economic prosperity for many whites (and some blacks), the beginnings of the Cold War, open racial discrimination across the South, bus boycotts, and riots at rock concerts. By the decade's end, Elvis Presley—rock's biggest star—had joined the army; Little Richard had joined the ministry; some watered-down federal civil rights legislation had been passed; and the South—as well as many northern cities like Cleveland—remained as segregated as ever.

In racially divided Detroit, however, a young entrepreneur named Berry Gordy founded an all-black record label called Motown, which would come to rule the charts throughout the 1960s. Motown became a point of pride for the black community not only because of its wide acceptance from white audiences. A black-owned record company is by nature political, and, according to cultural historian Suzanne E. Smith, helped the black community in Detroit to promote and articulate its own social, cultural, and

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<sup>18</sup> John A. Jackson, *The Alan Freed Story: The Early Years of Rock & Roll* (Narberth: Collectables Records Corp., 2005), 7.

political agendas. “Motown Records teaches important lessons about how ‘cultural politics’ operated at the grass-roots level,” she writes.<sup>19</sup> Though Gordy did not permit his artists to make overt political statements through the music or on a personal level, there is no doubt that the musical culture created by the nation’s most successful black business should “be understood in political terms regardless of whether or not the company or artists perceived it as such.”<sup>20</sup> That Motown became known as “The Sound of Young America” speaks volumes about the impact music had on young people who, in the 1960s, were leading the revolution for racial equality.

Though some music fans and critics may not consider Motown rock and roll, its roots are in the same rhythm and blues that inspired Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and Elvis Presley. The popularity and success of Motown would not have been possible without the rock and roll phenomenon that preceded it; funk and soul artists like Otis Redding, James Brown, and Sly and the Family Stone owe just as much to the early days of rock and roll as to blues and rhythm and blues artists of decades past. For the purposes of this thesis the term rock and roll will be used to describe popular music born of the rhythm and blues seed in the 1950s and 1960s.

Despite the popularity of Motown artists like The Supremes and Smokey Robinson, prejudice was still common, and violence stayed at the top of the news with police dogs attacking civil rights activists in Birmingham in May 1963 and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy later that year. Riots in Cleveland, Los Angeles, and other cities between 1965 and 1968 caused many performers to feel guilty and angry about their inability to speak out on the issues of the day. Young Clevelanders grew frustrated

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<sup>19</sup> Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, 11.

and angry at that time as well, as they watched friends go off to Vietnam and as they experienced and witnessed racism all over town. Cleveland elected Carl Stokes the first black mayor of a major city in 1967, giving many people hope that good things were finally on their way; but that hope was shattered by the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy the following year. By then, artists like The Temptations, Sly and the Family Stone, and James Brown were tired of biting their tongues and began writing socially conscious lyrics and publicly allying themselves with political and social causes.

Despite the centrality of the Moondog Coronation Ball in rock's founding years, no scholarly work has yet been written exploring the state of race relations and rock and roll in Cleveland from 1952 through 1966. The Moondog has been written about as a seminal event in music history in hundreds if not thousands of books and articles, but most do not delve deeply into the racial aspects of the city of Cleveland at the time, nor do they examine how Freed's radio show and concerts may have contributed to the city's significance as a center of rock music and civil rights activism. Deanna Adams' *Rock 'n' Roll and the Cleveland Connection* (2002) is the only book to look specifically at Cleveland's rock and roll history from its inception until the 1990s; it is an exhaustive collection of interviews and facts though there is little analysis or historical context in her work. Still, it is an interesting read and has a good amount of information on those whom Adams considers the major players in Cleveland's music history.

Several books have been written on the impact of rock and roll on race relations, notably Suzanne E. Smith's *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (2003) and Michael T. Bertrand's *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (2005). These works

focus on regional aspects of music and race and thoroughly explore what was happening nationwide in the formative years of rock and roll and the modern civil rights movement. John A. Jackson's *The Alan Freed Story: The Early Years of Rock & Roll* (2005) provides background information on Freed which helps to explain his personal interest in black music, and gives some insight into the early days of rock music in Cleveland, though most of the book discusses Freed's post-Cleveland years in New York City. Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave's *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock 'n' Roll* (1988) is a well-researched look at the music's opponents whom those in the music industry confronted in its first thirty years. Though the authors do write about Freed, they do not offer anything original to say about him or Cleveland's racial climate in the 1950s. Brian Ward argues in *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (1998) that music provided a forum through which racial and social issues could be debated and a black identity formed. Ward gives detailed descriptions of the recording and radio industries in the early years of rhythm and blues, information that many other sources fail to provide yet is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the music. Paul Friedlander's *Rock & Roll: A Social History, Second Edition* (2006) is a broader look at the two movements which significantly shaped twentieth century American culture, and is a valuable reference.

My thesis is the first study to look specifically at the years 1952 through 1966 in the context of rock and roll music and race relations in Cleveland, and to illustrate the connection between the Second Great Migration and its impact on Cleveland and the post-war generation's attitudes about music and race. Oral histories are an invaluable resource for any study of attitudes and social climates, and those conducted for this thesis

will be heavily relied upon to reconstruct the years covered by my paper. I spoke with Northeast Ohioans who were young music fans, as well to performers and radio personalities of the time, in order to gain an intimate view into the lives of everyday Clevelanders who were affected by rock and roll. These oral histories as well as other Cleveland-specific primary sources provide the basis for my argument about rock and roll's black roots providing a cultural education for a generation of music fans, including those who adhered to the racial prejudice of their parents; this cultural education also inspired fear in many adults for the change that a liberalization of racial views and sexual mores brought with it. Rock and roll was carried to the North with the Second Great Migration, and along with technological advances in radio and the recording industry, changed the way music was heard and how Americans perceived one another. As important as rock and roll was to young Americans, however, its influence would only go so far in changing racial attitudes and inspiring new ideas about what American society should be.

## CHAPTER II

### THE BIG BEAT

The National Council of Christians and Jews awarded Cleveland, Ohio, its top Relations Center Award for 1951 in recognition of the city's "outstanding improvement among its racial, religious, language and national groups." The Council commended the Glenville neighborhood's YMCA for being the first completely interracial branch in the world. "In this city," the Council stated, "the Urban League, the NAACP, the Conference of Christians and Jews, the Community Relations Board and many other agencies enjoy the most healthful cooperation." The award came just a few years after the long-held policy of racial discrimination at Euclid Beach Park was challenged by an interracial group of activists from the local branch of the Committee for Racial Equality (CORE). In September 1946, six activists were ejected from the dance pavilion, and when two black off-duty city policemen stepped in on their behalf, a physical altercation between the park police and city officers resulted in one of the black officers getting shot in the leg with his own gun. Though there had been protests earlier in the summer that did not involve violence, this incident caused Mayor Thomas A. Burke to close the park a week

before the season ended. When the park reopened in 1947, the dance pavilion was under the management of a private club, most likely to avoid violation of city council's new rules regarding amusement park licensing and racial discrimination.<sup>21</sup>

The State of Ohio had anti-discrimination laws on the books as far back as the Ohio Civil Rights Law of 1894, which prohibited discrimination in public businesses and buildings. Cities across Ohio largely ignored this law into the 1950s, however, and though Cleveland had its own such laws in place, there was little enforcement.

Organizations like the Future Outlook League and the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been working since their founding (1935 and 1912, respectively) to improve interracial relations in Cleveland, and by 1950 there were fewer public places that banned blacks. When city council passed the nation's first Fair Employment Practices law in 1950 the Cleveland Community Relations Board (CCRB) was given the task of resolving employment discrimination complaints. This outlawed discrimination or aiding and abetting discrimination in employment or applications. The CCRB was also meant "to promote amicable relations among the racial and cultural groups within the community," and was given authority to distribute information about such intergroup relations. The City of Cleveland was officially attempting to make itself a more welcoming place for those moving from the South and overseas, as well as for native Clevelanders.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "Cite Cleveland for Race Amity Record," *Call and Post*, February 23, 1952; The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History, "Euclid Beach Park Riot," Case Western Reserve University <http://ech.cwru.edu/ech-cgi/article.pl?id=EBPR> (accessed February 7, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Ohio History Central, "Ohio Civil Rights Law of 1894," Ohio Historical Society, <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=1461&nm=Ohio-Civil-Rights-Law-of-1894> (accessed February 7, 2010); Raymond Jirran, "Cleveland and the Negro Following World War II" (doctoral dissertation, Kent State University, 1972), 99; City of Cleveland City Council, *Racial, Religious, and National Origin Non-Discrimination Provisions of the Charter and Codified Ordinances of the City of Cleveland up to September 1952*, sections 1.1903 Community Relations Board, 1.1904 Duties, 13.2707



Cleveland's black population grew 76.1 percent to 148,547 between 1940 and 1950, the largest gain of any big city in Ohio. This staggering rise occurred in the first decade of the Second Great Migration (1940-1970), during which five million black southerners moved North and West. Cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles saw similar increases in their black populations, as well as in their populations of immigrants from countries in Europe and Asia. Detroit's black population, for example, nearly doubled from 1940 to 1950. The American population grew by approximately four million people during that decade. The nationwide black population remained less than ten percent of the total population as of the 1950 census, though it gained more than two million black Americans.

Such population changes created a host of social problems in large cities like Cleveland. The *Call and Post*, the city's black newspaper, ran headlines like "'Nowhere to Live' is Cry in Housing Crisis" and "10 Shiver In Unheated Room" in 1952, emphasizing the disproportionate toll the housing shortage was taking on the "rigidly-restricted Negro population." Overcrowded and understaffed schools were another concern for Clevelanders of all races, though black neighborhoods like Glenville and the Central area were especially neglected. One report suggested that Ohio needed to build eight new classrooms each day until 1960 to accommodate increased student enrollment. The 1951 Police Annual Report had more bad news for black residents when it revealed

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(3060-2) Discrimination in Employment Practices, 13.2711 (3060-6) Compliance and Enforcement, Urban League of Greater Cleveland Records, 1917-1971, Container 41, Folder 1, Series IV, Organization File COU-MET, MS 3573, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland.

that blacks killed one another, primarily with guns and knives, at a rate of thirty times others in the city.<sup>23</sup>

Despite these problems Cleveland's national reputation as "the best location in the nation" for race relations preceded the *Plain Dealer's* Ray Gillespie as he toured the United States in 1952. He was often asked how Cleveland had developed such a reputation, and he attributed it to the city's "liberal tradition" and diversity. "The Negroes of Cleveland, too, have played an important part in creating this situation by militant action, political activity and business development," he wrote. "They have made it clear to their fellow citizens that they will not tolerate racial discrimination in any area of their public life." These comments reflect the black middle class approach to racial discrimination, as the reality of life for the majority of black Clevelanders, particularly those who had recently migrated from the South, likely did not involve extensive activism or business development. Though it is true that Cleveland has a long history of black civil rights activity, most in the black community were poor and often uneducated

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<sup>23</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population:1950*, Volume 1, Number of Inhabitants, Table 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952); Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, U.S. Census Bureau, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790-1990, and By Hispanic Origin, For the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States*, Table 1, United States—Race and Hispanic Origin: 1790 to 1990, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/tab01.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2010), 2002; W.O. Walker, Down the Big Road, *Call and Post*, January 5, 1952; The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, "Timeline," The New York Public Library, <http://www.inmotionaame.org/timeline.cfm> (accessed February 10, 2010); "Negro Population Grows In Cleveland, Cincy, Akron," *Call and Post*, January 5, 1952; History Detroit, "Statistics: Populations of Various Ethnic Groups," History Detroit, <http://www.historydetroit.com/stats.asp> (accessed March 31, 2010); Marty Richardson, "'Nowhere to Live' is Cry in Housing Crisis," *Call and Post*, January 12, 1952; Thaddeus Stockes, "10 Shiver In Unheated Room," *Call and Post*, November 19, 1952; Marian Mins, "1128 Must 'Wait' for Education," *Call and Post*, October 4, 1952; "Children Retarded By Overcrowded Schools," *Call and Post*, October 11, 1952; Ohio Schools Survey Committee, "What Faces Ohio's Public Schools? A Brief Digest of the Report of the Ohio School Survey Committee, 1954, 19, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records, Cleveland, Ohio, 1924-1969, Container 54, MS 3520, Folder 6, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland; "Central Area Cleveland's Most Deadly," *Call and Post*, June 14, 1952.

and would have been shunned by many of the middle class blacks who populated civic and political organizations.

As Gillespie toured the nation he was also asked about Karamu House, the settlement house and cultural center established in 1915 by a white couple, Russell and Rowena Woodham-Jelliffe, who sought to bring together people of various ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds. Thousands had attended Karamu's theatrical performances over the years, and came to see "democracy in action," according to Gillespie, adding, "I sometimes wonder if the Jelliffes have ever realized that they were helping to lay foundation stones in race relations...."<sup>24</sup>

Though Karamu was a noteworthy example of interracial harmony in Cleveland, most nightlife in the city was not quite as progressive. Black nightlife mainly revolved around the Euclid Avenue-East 105<sup>th</sup> and Cedar-Lee areas, and advertisements for nightclubs featuring black performers appeared regularly in the *Call and Post*, but rarely in the city's mainstream press. The *Plain Dealer's* entertainment section instead emphasized motion pictures shown in Technicolor at downtown theatres such as the Hippodrome and Allen. While movie theatres attracted multiracial audiences, the city's black paper almost never published ads for them, nor were there many feature stories about films or film stars. This may have been due to the dearth of black actors in major motion pictures, at least in prominent, non-stereotyped roles. Nevertheless, the *Call and Post* gives the impression that music was far more important than movies to black Clevelanders in the 1950s. Café Tia Juana, Gleason's, and the Towne Casino were popular clubs in 1952, featuring acts such as Tiny Grimes and His Rockin' Highlanders, Duke Jenkins and His Variety Quintet, and Ray Bradley and His Orchestra. Most of these acts played jazz, rhythm and

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<sup>24</sup> Ray L. Gillespie, Community Relations, *Plain Dealer*, March 16, 1952.

blues, or jump music, and though the term *rock* was not yet used to describe a particular genre of music the word was incorporated into song lyrics and descriptions of upcoming concerts. Hal “Cornbread” Singer’s show at the Ebony Club in January 1952 promised to “rock in rhythm and melody,” and Big John Grair was “Rocking Jenny Jones” at Gleason’s. These musicians and many others laid the foundation for what was soon to be known as rock and roll music.<sup>25</sup>

### ***“The Industry Goes for It”***

In the late 1940s, Americans were attempting to return to a sense of normalcy after years of economic depression and war. The modernization that had characterized much of the 1920s was somewhat stalled during the 1930s and 1940s, and Americans were eager to continue on the path to bigger and better products and ideas. The music industry was also ready to modernize, and for the first time in decades sought to create major change from within in order to capitalize on the nation’s post-war excitement and willingness to consume.

Two white disk jockeys, “Daddy” Gene Nobles and “John R” Richbourg of Nashville’s WLAC station, could barely keep up with the requests they were receiving for rhythm and blues and “jump band jazz” records. The deejays began featuring nightly rhythm and blues programming that reached as far as West Texas and Canada, making WLAC one of the most important stations for the burgeoning rhythm and blues sound. Memphis’ WDIA started as a white-oriented station, but had lost enough money in its first year that the white owners recreated it with all-black programming and deejays in

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<sup>25</sup> Advertisements for Café Tia Juana, Gleason’s, and Towne Casino, *Call and Post*, January 5, 1952; “Blue Velvet Man Coming,” *Call and Post*, January 26, 1952.

order to serve the region's 1.5 million blacks. White deejay Bill Gordon, who later moved to Cleveland, worked for WMPS in Memphis from 1946 to 1950 playing rhythm and blues records; he claimed to be the first white jockey to do so. When WHBQ's Dewey Phillips became Memphis's premier white proponent of black music once Gordon left in 1950, there were more than a few whites hosting rhythm and blues radio shows. White deejays were playing rhythm and blues records on the West Coast as well. In Los Angeles Hunter Hancock hosted a daily radio show on KFVD beginning in 1943, starting with jazz and then moving on to rhythm and blues for "average black listeners."<sup>26</sup>

Technological changes in the record and radio industries made it possible for deejays like these to feature black music. In the 1930s, the FCC had restricted the number of radio stations licensed for each market to three to five, guaranteeing that the major networks—NBC, CBS, and Mutual—had control, with perhaps one independent station in the mix. During the Second World War, the FCC had denied requests for licenses from additional stations, citing a paucity of the electronic materials required to build transmitters. After the war ended and Americans were no longer required to ration supplies and raw materials, the radio and record industries were allowed to expand. While a scientist with the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) developed a cheaper, long-play disk that would be far less fragile than the standard shellac 78 rpm disks, the FCC began approving many long-delayed requests for radio station licenses.<sup>27</sup>

When Columbia Records, CBS's sister company, released the first twelve-inch, 33 1/3 rpm long-playing high-fidelity record on Vinylite in 1948, its competitors had little to say

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<sup>26</sup> Jackson, 40-41.

<sup>27</sup> Peterson, 101; "One Record Holds Entire Symphony," *Life*, July 26, 1948, 40.

about it, though some acknowledged that it was “here to stay.”<sup>28</sup> Columbia offered to share their creation, patent-free, with RCA Victor in order for it to become the industry standard, but they were not interested. Having tested their own version of 33 ½ disks in the 1930s which they found impractical, RCA countered Columbia’s creation in 1949 by developing a seven-inch vinyl record that played at 45 rpm. RCA extolled the virtues of the 45 in *Billboard* and other magazines. “The Industry Goes for It!” and “The Market Is Growing!” exclaims RCA in one advertisement. Offering “only ‘the music you want, when you want it’ in a package far more compact and lighter than a 78 or 33½ LP, and promoting its indestructibility and ability to “be mailed anywhere without fear of breakage,” the 45 was a boon to the growing record distribution industry.<sup>29</sup> The smaller record shaped a new way to promote new songs. Record companies simply mailed them to radio stations.<sup>30</sup> In a manner of speaking, the record and radio industries were “going for it” with all the technological advances that were taking place post-war.

In 1947 the FCC considered putting frequency modulation (FM) stations closer together on the band to accommodate the influx of requests. By June of that year there were approximately one thousand FM stations broadcasting to more than five hundred communities in forty-seven states, with only Montana having not filed an application. Another thousand permits were either pending or had already been granted and construction of stations was imminent.<sup>31</sup> At the end of 1948 the FCC had authorized almost a thousand amplitude modulation (AM) stations, with another 530 applications

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<sup>28</sup> “One Record Holds Entire Symphony: New long-playing 12-inch disk contains 45 minutes of music,” 40.

<sup>29</sup> RCA Victor Records advertisement, *Billboard*, July 30, 1949, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Peterson, 100-101.

<sup>31</sup> “FCC Trying Out Cramming of FM Stations on Band,” *Billboard*, June 7, 1947, 9.

pending in January 1949. The popular AM radio band was oversaturated.<sup>32</sup> At the end of the decade fifteen new stations were going live every month to the eighty million radios across the country.<sup>33</sup>

By 1951 the number of radio stations per market had doubled. The majority of these new stations were independently owned and used phonograph records, a practice rejected by the major networks.<sup>34</sup> Records were rarely played on-air as live performances were the common method of broadcasting music. The company that pressed singer Bing Crosby's disks made sure that "Not licensed for radio air play" was stamped on each of them. Artists and the record industry itself felt that free radio exposure would reduce or limit sales of popular recordings, a charge used by critics of free online music sharing in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They were, however, fighting a losing battle. Record sales declined in 1948 and 1949, but showed a measured increase between 1950 and 1954; by 1959 the total value of record sales was more than double what it had been in 1954.<sup>35</sup>

Radio exposure had a significant impact on this change. Stations had to find some way to differentiate themselves from one another.<sup>36</sup> White country and western bands played live on some independent stations in the late 1940s, but black rhythm and blues musicians were not afforded the same opportunity on a large scale, either via live performance or recorded music. The number of independent record companies and radio stations had increased and needed something new to attract a share of the market. Smaller labels were more willing to take risks with new styles, and unknown artists were

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<sup>32</sup> "AM Bids Still Swamp FCC," *Billboard*, January 8, 1949, 6.

<sup>33</sup> "Radio Is Here To Stay," *Kiplinger's Personal Finance*, February 1950, 40.

<sup>34</sup> Peterson, 101.

<sup>35</sup> Peterson., 105.

<sup>36</sup> Peterson, 105.

proving to be highly competitive with the majors. The small labels began offering their music to independent radio stations, while the large networks could still afford to say no to playing records. Though there were few stations dedicated to black music programming, this benefitted both the independent labels and radio stations, as small record companies and retail shops began to simply buy airtime in order to showcase their recordings.<sup>37</sup> In 1948, the four largest record companies enjoyed eighty-one percent of popular music hits; by 1959 they had only thirty-four percent. Two reasons account for this sharp shift. First, the majors no longer had control over new talent (they bought out the contracts of proven performers who initially recorded on independent labels, as in the case of RCA buying Elvis Presley from Sun Records in 1955). Second, the national distribution of records was not supervised by the major labels.<sup>38</sup>

However, the major labels did have distribution centers in major cities, including Cleveland that provided music for jukeboxes. Jukeboxes had been around for several decades and by the 1940s they were more popular than ever. There were 400,000 jukeboxes across the United States in 1941. Most people heard music through a jukebox in their daily lives as they visited drug stores, restaurants, nightclubs or other public places. The wartime manufacture of jukeboxes was halted in April 1942, but that did little to stop their influence. They were a significant factor in popularizing the latest recordings. “Music was actually [broken] by jukeboxes,” not radio, says Henry LoConti, a Clevelander who worked in the jukebox business after the Second World War and founded the legendary Agora Ballroom in the 1960s, which later featured up and coming artists like Bruce Springsteen. LoConti helped stock 180 jukeboxes around Cleveland, a

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<sup>37</sup> Peterson, 104.

<sup>38</sup> Peterson, 106.



job which required him to know what music was popular in each location. He was witness to every new technology and trend in music that followed the war. “It was a very interesting time to be in music because music was starting to change,” LoConti says. “You started out with Frank Sinatra and Perry Como...and then around ’54, ’55, suddenly you’re starting to hit some of the newer music, and by ’56 you’re into...Elvis Presley and that whole genre of music.”<sup>39</sup> Jukeboxes were an important gauge of musical trends, and the record companies were paying attention.

The markets for black and white music were still largely separate, despite the influence of independent record labels and radio stations. While many white disk jockeys across the country followed in the footsteps of Nobles and Richbourg, rhythm and blues was still considered “race music” and not appropriate for “mainstream” audiences. It needed somebody white to promote it in order to make it acceptable to other whites in the United States. Alan Freed was just the man for the job and, as Freed biographer John Jackson writes, “no disc jockey, black or white, would do more than he to promote both rhythm and blues and the music’s talented black artists to white people around the world.”<sup>40</sup> Part of Freed’s passion for the music was his refusal to play white versions of songs originally recorded by black artists. “Alan was emotionally connected to the music,” says Judith Fisher Freed, webmaster of the Alan Freed archives. “[He] was way ahead of the curve with black music.”<sup>41</sup> Though clearly not the first disk jockey to play music by black artists, he may have been the first in the North to receive recognition for his devotion to black music.

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<sup>39</sup> LoConti, interview.

<sup>40</sup> Jackson, 42.

<sup>41</sup> Judith Fisher Freed, email message to author, February 6, 2010.

Before the music Freed helped popularize took over the airwaves, the American music charts were filled with artists like Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, and Jo Stafford. Mostly singing standards and jazz, there was little controversy about the lyrics or performances associated with these performers. One exception was Sinatra (who later called rock music “the most brutal, ugly, desperate, vicious form of expression it has been my misfortune to hear”<sup>42</sup>), who induced hysteria among young girls known as bobby-soxers in the 1940s, creating concern from adults so serious that one man even wrote a letter to J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. While listening to Sinatra sing live on the radio, the writer explained, he heard young girls screaming for “The Voice.” As the program went on, he thought about “how easy it would be for certain-minded manufacturers to create another Hitler here in America through the influence of mass-hysteria! I believe that those who are using this shrill whistling sound are aware that it is similar to that which produced Hitler.” Such open displays of lust expressed by teen girls over their singing idol was troubling to many, but this sort of frenzy would become commonplace in the world of popular music when rock and roll—and teenagers—took over for good.<sup>43</sup> When white teenage girls swooned over black singers like Little Richard and Frankie Lymon, however, adults reacted even more strongly to the phenomenon. Race made all the difference.

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<sup>42</sup> Mitch Yamasaki, “Using Rock ‘N’ Roll to Teach the History of Post-World War II America,” *The History Teacher* 29, no. 2 (February 1996), 188.

<sup>43</sup> “Frank Sinatra and the ‘bobby-soxers’,” *The Guardian*, January 10, 1945, <http://century.guardian.co.uk/1940-1949/Story/0,,127764,00.html> ; The Paley Center for Media, “Sinatra and the Bobby-Soxers,” <http://www.paleycenter.org/sinatra-the-bobby-soxers> (accessed February 12, 2010).

### ***King of the Moondoggers***

Although Alan Freed is the man legend says started it all, in reality he created neither the music nor the term *rock and roll*. But his steadfast belief in and promotion of the music certainly cements his place in rock and roll history. “I really dig Alan Freed for...playing both pop music and R&B music,” said Clarence Collins of Little Anthony and The Imperials in 2009. “He did it, then he got knocked down. But I’ll never forget that he was the one that started it.”<sup>44</sup> Freed became one of the best-known disk jockeys in the country, but he always gave credit where credit was due for the music that made him famous in the sounds of black America. “Rock ‘n’ roll is a great river of music into which many streams flow,” he said in a 1957 interview. “It really began over a hundred years ago, in the cotton fields and on the levees, with work songs, spirituals and river songs. It’s just our own American music, earthy and soulful.”<sup>45</sup>

Alan Freed was born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in 1921, the second son of Charles and Maude Freed. His early life was marked by frequent moves, finally landing in Salem, Ohio, in 1933. The Freed family loved music. They had weekly Sunday evening piano recitals, and waited eagerly for new big band records to be released so the boys could learn to play the songs themselves. As a teenager, Alan Freed organized a band called the Sultans of Swing, named after a Harlem dance orchestra, showing an early curiosity about black musicians. At Ohio State University in the early 1940s, Freed studied journalism and developed an interest in broadcasting, though he left after less than a year to join the army. After a medical discharge he returned to Salem and eventually enrolled in a Youngstown broadcasting school. Several announcing jobs later

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<sup>44</sup> John Soeder, “Little Anthony and The Imperials,” *The Plain Dealer*, March 31, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Theodore Irwin, “Rock ‘n Roll ‘n Alan Freed,” *Pageant*, July 1957, 61.

he fell into a gig at Akron station WAKR after the regular disk jockey failed to show up; Freed did so well that he was hired to replace the missing deejay. The show he hosted was called “Request Revue” and featured popular music and jazz. Freed quickly became a well-known personality, and his show became WAKR’s top moneymaker. After leaving radio amidst a dispute with WAKR, Freed took a job hosting movies on a Cleveland television station. But he was unhappy. Radio was where his heart was, and he was desperate for a way to get back into his favorite medium.

By 1951, Cleveland’s popular Record Rendezvous on Prospect Avenue was selling a steady stream of rhythm and blues records to the area’s growing population of black residents. Leo Mintz, the Jewish businessman who founded the store in 1939, also, and perhaps apocryphally, noticed an increasing number of white teens checking out the rhythm and blues section, which was highly unusual at the time. Cleveland was a decidedly segregated city, and the fact that white kids, even if they were few in number, were coming to a record store located next to a black neighborhood impressed Mintz—and his new friend Alan Freed. There are conflicting accounts of this tale, though it was certainly the case that white kids were listening to black artists, and both Mintz and Freed took notice. The fact is, most of those who listened to Freed’s WJW radio show, and the majority of those who attended his early concerts, were black. Freed admitted in 1957 that “those Cleveland affairs appealed most to colored people,” and that he received stacks of hate mail calling him “a nigger-lover.” Not until he moved to New York did he realize just how many whites enjoyed the music.<sup>46</sup> Whatever the timeline, it is clear that Freed was able to reach audiences long-neglected by mainstream radio programming and society: blacks and teenagers.

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<sup>46</sup> Irwin, 61.

Thanks to Mintz, Freed joined radio station WJW in 1951 where he initially hosted a show playing classical music. Mintz saw an opportunity to use Freed, who had become a frequent drinking companion, as a way to promote his record store through a show featuring rhythm and blues. Freed at first declined Mintz's offer to "buy" him a radio show on WJW, the station he had sponsored for many years. Freed was hesitant to play race records, thinking his audience might be limited. Mintz was persistent, and after many beers, a lot of thought, and hours of listening to La Vern Baker, Ivory Joe Hunter, and Red Prysock records, Freed finally agreed. Freed was known to exaggerate or leave out certain facts of his life and career histories, and he often took sole credit for promoting rhythm and blues on his "Moon Dog House" program, though it is clear that Mintz was the driving force behind Freed's decision to host a rhythm and blues show. Without Mintz, Freed's career may have stagnated, and the music world may not have evolved at the same pace.<sup>47</sup>

As popular as rhythm and blues records may have been at Record Rendezvous, mainstream singers dominated the popular music charts. In March 1952 Doris Day had the best selling pop 33 1/3 album and 45 in the United States with "I'll See You in My Dreams," and Kay Starr's "Wheel of Fortune" was the best selling pop single. The song was originally recorded by black jazz singer Johnny Hartman in 1951; interestingly enough, Dinah Washington, Eddie Wilcox and Sunny Gale, and The Cardinals had their versions of the song in the top ten of *Billboard's* rhythm and blues (i.e., black) chart at the same time Starr's version was number one on *Billboard's* pop (i.e., white) chart.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Jackson, 33-35, 38-39.

<sup>48</sup> "Best Selling Pop Singles," "Best Selling Pop Albums," "Best Selling Retail Rhythm & Blues Records," *The Billboard*, March 22, 1952, 28, 38; Jamm Upp. "The Music Master: Eddie Wilcox," *The World of Marion-Net E-zines*, <http://home.earthlink.net/~v1tiger/ewilcox.html> (accessed February 12, 2010); Bryan

Multiple versions of songs had been common for many years, and the practice continued through the 1950s as white artists regularly recorded popular rock and roll songs in order to make them more palatable to mainstream audiences. Black performers were musically segregated into the rhythm and blues category, rarely if ever appearing in the popular music charts with white artists. Freed was one of the few white deejays in the country to play only the original versions of songs by black artists.

A small article on the entertainment page of the *Plain Dealer* on March 20, 1952 mixed news about upcoming plays and movies with a brief mention of a concert scheduled for the following night at the Cleveland Arena on Euclid Avenue. “Tiny Grimes’ Band and a half-dozen recording blues and rhythm singers are being combined in a ‘Moon Dog Coronation Ball’ ....Leo Mintz, head of the Record Rendezvous, is sponsoring the hot-jazz show,” the story announced. Freed’s name is not mentioned, though he is often given credit for being the mastermind behind the historic event.<sup>49</sup>

The Moondog Coronation Ball is generally accepted as having been the first rock and roll concert. But that is more legend than fact, as similar musical showcase events had taken place before and the Moondog was not billed as a rock and roll show; the poster advertising the concert simply called it “the most terrible ball of them all.” Freed built on the success of his popular radio program when he named the March 21, 1952 Cleveland extravaganza after his radio moniker, “King of the Moondoggers.” Much has been speculated about this event, yet little is truly known. Though the event technically was integrated, there were far more blacks in attendance than whites. The actual number of

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J. Cuevas and Will Friedwald, “Songs From The Heart: The Johnny Hartman Discography,” [www.JazzDiscography.com](http://www.JazzDiscography.com), <http://www.jazzdiscography.com/fitzgera/hartman.htm> (accessed February 12, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> Glenn Pullen, *Swinging Down the Avenue*, *Plain Dealer*, March 20, 1952.

attendees is disputed; Freed said there were about nine thousand tickets sold in advance, and various reports claim that an additional six thousand to ten thousand music fans tried rushing into the Cleveland Arena that cloudy March Friday night. The “riot” that ensued caused the show to be stopped after only about an hour.

The *Plain Dealer*'s front page headline on March 22<sup>nd</sup> read “Moon Dog Ball Is Halted As 6,000 Crash Arena Gate.”<sup>50</sup> The *Call and Post* featured a front page story about the Moondog in its March 29<sup>th</sup> issue. Reporter Valena Minor Williams attended the concert and wrote “Moon Doggers ‘Break it Up’,” a detailed description of the melee from start to finish. “What happened at the Cleveland Arena last Friday night when the highly publicized Moon Dog Coronation Ball got underway shocked the entire community,” her story begins. “[It] astonished the people themselves who became part of the pushing, brawling mob in a sort of mass hysteria that no one can explain and that no one can control.” Williams explains that there were no big names at the event, rather “a galaxy of some of the not-quite-famous recording artists whose weird rhythms have been the substance of the fanatically followed blues and rhythms program aired nightly over WJW by Alan Freed and bearing the imaginative name ‘The Moondog Show’.” She goes on to say that Freed’s radio show features lesser known black artists that are rarely featured on other programs, “not even those manned by Negro disk jockeys.” Most of Freed’s listeners were teenagers, and since the music he played was “their kind” they came out in the thousands to see the show on March 21<sup>st</sup>. “Never has there been such a mob at a Cleveland dance,” Williams declares, adding, “and less than 1 per cent of them were white.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Jane Scott, “30 years ago, ‘Moon Dog’ howled,” *Plain Dealer*, March 14, 1982.

<sup>51</sup> Valena Minor Williams, “‘Moon Doggers ‘Break It Up’,” *Call and Post*, March 29, 1952.

Williams expresses concern that black teenagers are being swept up in this music, corrupted by disk jockeys who sought only to exploit them and take their money. Noting the fancy attire of most attendees she laments how “sickening” it is that these kids “had so few social outlets that they had clung to this affair as a really social occasion instead of just another dance.”

It is appalling to think that Moondog with his late-hour radio show on WJW would appeal to so many Negro teen-agers, that their parents would tolerate their actual addiction to a show of “gut bucket blues and lowdown rhythms.” The shame of the situation lies not in the frustrated crowd that rushed the Arena, but in a community which allows a program like this to continue and exploit the Negro teensters! Something should be done.<sup>52</sup>

An editorial in the same issue of the *Call and Post* also draws attention to the delinquent element of the Moondog crowd, those smoking marijuana, cursing, “wearing their hats inside a public place, guzzling liquor without restraints from pocket flasks, and... shooting themselves with narcotics in the midst of a crowd!” Interestingly enough, the editorial writer gives credit to black police officers for helping to avoid “a disastrous blow to future race relations in Cleveland.”<sup>53</sup>

Williams’ account was not the last of the *Call and Post*’s coverage of the Moondog. Middle class blacks were appalled by the music black teenagers were listening to and feared the worst. Reporter Marty Richardson wrote a series of articles in April and May 1952 about “schoolboy and schoolgirl listeners” turning into “Moon-Doggers.” Young people did not listen to this “filth” and “lyric garbage” because they really wanted to, Richardson explains to his readers. It was simply a matter of indoctrination by smut peddlers like Freed and other disk jockeys—the more they listened, the more they wanted, because it is “VERY natural to learn to like, or at least stomach, whatever is

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<sup>52</sup> Williams.

<sup>53</sup> “Moondog Madness,” *Call and Post*, March 29, 1952.



given to you if you can't get anything else.” In his eyes, and in the eyes of many of the music's early detractors, this sort of Stockholm syndrome of rhythm and blues was creating juvenile delinquents out of otherwise good kids. Cleveland police received over twenty reports of car robberies during the March 21<sup>st</sup> Moondog concert; three teenage boys in Shaker Heights were arrested for stealing a car in order to attend a later Moondog dance in Akron; youngsters who ventured out to see any of Freed's events mingled with “pimps and prostitutes and robbers and dope-fiends who go to hear music suitable to THEM,” all so they would have the chance to hear their favorite songs performed live and, of course, so that they could see their idol, the King of the Moondoggers Alan Freed. Critics felt that keeping company with fellow music fans considered the “undesirables” of society could only lead young Americans down the dark and dangerous path to crime, debauchery, and rock and roll.<sup>54</sup>

The *Plain Dealer* mentioned the concert only once again, on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, in a story buried between an announcement of a 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary and advertisements for nylon stockings, laundry trays, and the East Ohio Gas Company. Under the headline “Charge 14,000 Sale for ‘Moondog Ball’,” the story explains that tickets were oversold for the “ill-fated” concert, creating a riot as ticket holders waited outside the venue for admission. The racial composition of the audience was not mentioned. Freed's name is used in the last paragraph as one of the promoters who faced possible charges. In the eyes of *Plain Dealer* editors, the Moondog was just another concert that would soon fade into the memories of those who had attended.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Marty Richardson, “Today's Youngsters: Teen-Agers or Moon-Doggers?” *Call and Post*, April 19, 1952.

<sup>55</sup> “Charge 14,000 Sale for ‘Moondog Ball’,” *Plain Dealer*, March 23, 1952.

The aborted Moondog Coronation Ball made national news, with articles in publications like music industry magazine *Cash Box* and the black monthly *Jet* which featured the headline “25,000 Riot At Cleveland ‘Moondog’ Ball.”<sup>56</sup> The event was putting Cleveland—and the music—in the limelight, good publicity or not. White Cleveland disk jockey Bill Randle, who was the first person outside the South to write about Elvis Presley and who promoted Presley’s 1955 appearances in Cleveland, believed that the Moondog was a seminal musical and cultural event. “It was the beginning of the acceptance of black popular music as a force in radio,” Randle recalled thirty years later. “It was the first big show of its kind where the industry saw it as big business.”<sup>57</sup>

As evidenced by the series of articles in the *Call and Post* after the first Moondog dance in March, many black music fans and performers did not embrace the type of music promoted by Freed. Singer Austin Powell declared that fellow musician Cootie Williams would “bring true music—real music—back to Cleveland” during his next performance at the Ebony Club. The *Call and Post* wrote that Powell, leader of a string and vocal sextet, had already exhibited what “real music” was compared to “the souped up shouting and blasting blues wailing of so-called ‘popular’ vocal groups.”<sup>58</sup> Criticism of the latest trend in music is reminiscent of comments made about jazz in its early days, and ragtime before that. Ragtime’s popularity in the early 1900s caused black music critics to fear for the effect the music’s “bad words and hell-raising they heard about in the red-light district” might have on listeners,” and the lowering of “the musical taste and

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<sup>56</sup> “25,000 Riot At Cleveland ‘Moondog’ Ball,” *Jet*, April 3, 1952, 59.

<sup>57</sup> Scott.

<sup>58</sup> “Powell Sees ‘Return of Real Music’; Cootie Williams Hits Ebony Friday,” *Call and Post*, May 24, 1952.

standard of the whole musical public, irrespective of color or nationality.”<sup>59</sup> Jazz was considered by many to be “the devil’s music,” and it was banned from public dance halls in at least sixty communities by the end of the 1920s. Jazz composer Jelly Roll Morton’s grandmother kicked him out of the house upon discovering that he was playing jazz music in a sporting house. “She told me that devil music would surely bring about my downfall but I just couldn’t put it behind me,” he confessed. Many whites were drawn to jazz for the same reasons they were later drawn to rock and roll: the sense of liberation and modernity, the idea of having something completely different from what had come before—in essence, the opposite of what their parents’ generation had enjoyed. Racism also was featured in many critiques of jazz as white opponents feared that the hyper-sexualized dancing that accompanied jazz would lead to race mixing, immorality, and a loss of the traditional segregation that America had known since its birth. All of these fears were being revisited in the 1950s with the latest musical trend created by black Americans.<sup>60</sup>

***“And a little child shall lead them”***

Despite objections from black and white critics Freed’s personal popularity and national reputation continued to grow along with the popularity of his favorite music. In the months following the interrupted Moondog Coronation Ball at the Cleveland Arena,

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<sup>59</sup> Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 88-89.

<sup>60</sup> Culture Shock: The TV Series and Beyond, “The Devil’s Music: 1920s Jazz,” Public Broadcasting Service, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/beyond/jazz.html> (accessed February 17, 2010). For additional information about ragtime and its impact on music and culture, see Sotiropoulos’ book. For an oral history of jazz and the society which contributed to its formation, read *Hear Me Talkin’ To Ya: The Story Of Jazz As Told By The Men Who Made It*, eds. Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff (Toronto: General Publishing Company, 1955). Ted Gioia’s *The History of Jazz* (New York :Oxford University Press, 1998) is an excellent cultural history and provides necessary historical context of the black Africans and Americans who made jazz.

Freed produced a series of dances for teenagers in Cleveland, Akron, Vermillion, and Youngstown, and there were no signs that things would slow down anytime soon.<sup>61</sup> Edward Wolfeld, former manager of Record Rendezvous, remembered in 2002 how exciting it was to see the impact of the music on Freed's early audiences. "This was so new," he said, "this type of music bringing people together."<sup>62</sup> Why did teenagers fall in love with this black music? Jazz babies dared to wear short dresses and close-cropped hairstyles, smoke in public, and flaunt sexual convention. Bobbysoxers had been obsessed with Frank Sinatra and controversy ensued over his influence on teen girls. But there was nothing quite like the rock and roll phenomenon. This new style seemed to speak directly to American youth across racial barriers, perhaps most significantly to those kids living in segregated areas where they had little or no interaction with people of another race. Rock and roll was indeed a cultural education for black and white American teenagers.

"You feel good when you listen to Rock 'n' Roll," one girl told Alan Freed. "Everybody *belongs*, if you know what I mean."<sup>63</sup> A very simple statement which says quite a lot about why the music caught on with kids. Eugene Bank, a teenager from Chicago, wrote a letter to the editor of *Kiplinger's Personal Finance* in 1959 in response to comments about the link between rock and roll and juvenile delinquency. Bank suggests that kids who are brought up correctly will not succumb to the "leering sexual innuendo" or other "negative" aspects of the music. "I am not a beatnik, hep cat or

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<sup>61</sup> "5,000 Dance To Moondog," *Billboard*, July 5, 1952, 21.

<sup>62</sup> John Soeder, "Moondog Milestone: Remembering the world's first rock concert," *Plain Dealer*, March 21, 2002.

<sup>63</sup> Alan Freed, "Wonderful World of Rock," *Song Craze*, August 1957, 39. It is not specified whether the girl was black or white; however, she likely would have been referred to as a Negro if she were black, so she was probably white.

fanatic, but just a normal, happy, well-adjusted teen-ager who likes rock and roll,” he writes. “You went through it, we’re going through it, and other generations will go through it. Why fight it?”<sup>64</sup> When asked what they liked about rock and roll, black and white kids invariably said “the beat.” The beat was the basis of the music, and was often cited by critics as the thing that made this music “primitive” and dangerous. But teenagers were not trying to be dangerous—they just wanted to have fun, but they wanted their own kind of fun. Most young people question the values and traditions of their parents, but this generation was somehow different; nobody knew that at the time, but the way they consumed and enjoyed music was leading them toward a cultural revolution. Teenagers were now recognized not only as a distinct social group, but as an economic force as well. They would speak their minds and assert their independence with their money. Struggling with the two worlds many of them, black and white, lived in—that of their parents and the larger, racist American society, and the world they inhabited with their friends and the music they shared—these young music fans questioned the “natural” social order in a new way, laying the ground for the in-your-face tactics that many in the civil rights movement adopted in the following decade. Maybe critics were right: this new sound was dangerous.

The racial problems in Cleveland, however, continued to grow despite the increasing interest black music. The General Cable Corporation took out a full-page advertisement in the *Call and Post* for Labor Day 1952 featuring a quote from Isaiah 11:6, “And a little child shall lead them,” accompanied by a line drawing of three young boys playing with tools. The text explains how free of prejudice and hatred children are naturally “because prejudice is NOT inborn.” Adults are to blame for creating bigotry in the minds and

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<sup>64</sup> Eugene Bank, letter to the editor, *Kiplinger's Personal Finance*, July 1959, 47.

hearts of their children, it continues, and fair and equal standards are required so that all American kids will “advance and prosper” free of discrimination. Though the company in part may have been catering to the interests of black readers, it is also an extraordinary and impressive attempt by a major corporation to put the elimination of racial prejudice at the top of its agenda.<sup>65</sup>

The United States Supreme Court was also putting bigotry on their agenda in 1952. Several cases involving segregated schools had made their way through the courts in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In October, the Supreme Court agreed to bundle together five separate school desegregation cases from various states including Delaware and the District of Columbia, thus making it a national issue rather than simply a southern one. In December, the Court heard the first arguments in what would become the *Brown* decision.<sup>66</sup> Justice Harold Burton, former mayor of Cleveland (1935-1940) and Ohio senator (1941-1945), argued for the legal desegregation of schools based on changes in American society.<sup>67</sup> “Don’t you recognize that in seventy-five years social, economic and personal relationships may have changed so that what was a valid interpretation [of an 1872 Kansas segregation law] seventy-five years ago would not be a valid interpretation today?” he asked. Recognizing such changes, answered Justice Felix Frankfurter, would not require the Court to rule that previous laws were incorrectly

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<sup>65</sup> Advertisement for General Cable Corporation, *Call and Post*, September 6, 1952.

<sup>66</sup> The National Archives, “Timeline of Events Leading to the Brown v. Board of Education Decision, 1954,” The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/brown-v-board/timeline.html> (accessed February 17, 2010).

<sup>67</sup> Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, “Burton, Harold Hitz, (1888-1964),” Library of Congress, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=B001150> (accessed February 19, 2010).

interpreted or enforced, rather, that “some things have happened” in the following seventy-five years and that the legal system should reflect that.<sup>68</sup>

Laws can only do so much to influence attitudes, but sometimes laws should reflect changing attitudes; this was precisely the point these justices were making. Change happens through experience, through regular, in-person contact with people and situations unfamiliar to the individual. There were those in the Cleveland area who never subscribed to the racist attitudes of many white Americans, and they were agents of change in their communities and passed down those beliefs to their children. Sheila Blecman, now a Cleveland Heights business owner, was one of those children. She grew up in Elyria, a segregated, upper-middle class Cleveland suburb of about thirty thousand people.<sup>69</sup> “It was pretty safe and it was fun,” she recalls. “I thought it was a great thing growing up in a small town.” Blecman’s family was Jewish, but many of her friends were not, and she never felt different because of her religion except on holidays. Her father owned a grocery store in a black neighborhood where Blecman worked starting at the age of ten. The diversity she experienced between coming from a Jewish family, having non-Jewish white friends in school, and the dealing with black customers in the store impressed her from a young age. “I loved working in that store just because there were people that I had never even seen before, different types of people,” she says. The store was the only chance Blecman had to interact with non-whites, and her experiences were always positive. “...[T]hey were the nicest people, and I just thought, why is there a problem here? I couldn’t understand why there was such a problem of blacks and

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<sup>68</sup> Louis Lautier, “Thurgood Marshall Challenges South’s Segregation Law,” *Call and Post*, December 20, 1952.

<sup>69</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1950, Volume 1, Number of Inhabitants, Ohio*, Table 7 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1952).

whites getting on....[T]hey were very nice people and they treated me well, and my dad treated them real well and they loved my father.” She adds, “That’s my early remembrances of race relations.”<sup>70</sup>

The Blecmans also had a black cleaning woman named Jenny whom young Sheila “absolutely loved.” When Jenny would leave for the day she would run over to hug her. Pushing her away, Jenny invariably told the girl, “Wait for tomorrow, child. Wait for tomorrow.” This confused Blecman, who later understood what Jenny meant by her words and actions. “She was a wonderful woman,” she remembers, believing that Jenny realized that, someday, blacks and whites could embrace and show affection openly. Just not yet.<sup>71</sup>

John Wilson, who grew up in Cleveland and has been involved in music since he was twelve years old, had a different childhood experience with interracial relations. His family lived in the all-black 87<sup>th</sup> and Quincy neighborhood before being one of the first black families to move to the Lee-Harvard area. This neighborhood is where he was first personally struck by racism, when he was just seven or eight years old. One day while he was playing in the woods by McCracken Road, a white woman shouted at him to get back to his own side. “We don’t want you over here!” Wilson understood immediately what she meant. On other occasions he and his family were called racial slurs by neighbors and children, prompting his father, who was an otherwise peaceful man, to stand guard in his front window with a shotgun to protect his family from the offensive language and threats. His father’s experience at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in the late 1950s also helped him see the reality of racism. Mr.

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<sup>70</sup> Blecman, interview.

<sup>71</sup> Blecman, interview.



Wilson placed second out of one hundred people for a position with NASA when the program was new to Cleveland. The family knew he had been passed over because of his color, and Wilson remembers his mother consoling his father in the backyard. He had been working on the railroads up until then and wanted to do more for his family, but this disappointment stood in his way. Wilson had been raised by his parents to treat everyone equally, that “people are people, they have the same heart, the same blood,” but they also explained to him that there were bigots in the world. The NASA incident, Wilson recalls, “was [when] I really knew that it was divided.”<sup>72</sup>

There were some integrated schools in Cleveland and its suburbs. At Charles W. Eliot Elementary, for example, Wilson does not recall any racial tension between students, and he had friends of both races. They would go sledding together and make their own baseball diamonds at Cruse Park. “We didn’t look at each other as color,” he reports. “The kids got along.” Wilson remembers that most parents also got along, though there were some episodes of name-calling among adults. “There was an incident where one of the mothers came down [to my school] and called my mother the N-word, and that wasn’t pretty,” he says.<sup>73</sup> Disk jockey Lynn Tolliver, Jr. attended Eliot later and had also a diverse group of friends. “You just liked a guy or you didn’t,” he says, pointing out that race never entered into the minds of the kids he knew.<sup>74</sup> Joan Orosz grew up in Maple Heights on Cleveland’s East Side and attended St. Wenceslas, an integrated Catholic school. “We never thought anything of it,” she recalls. She first witnessed racism as a child while visiting family in Savannah, Georgia. The Jim Crow custom of blacks moving off the sidewalk for whites to walk on struck her as strange.

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<sup>72</sup> John Wilson, telephone interview by author, November 8, 2009.

<sup>73</sup> Wilson, interview.

<sup>74</sup> Tolliver, interview.

When she noticed two separate water fountains she immediately walked up to the one labeled “colored” and was admonished by her mother that she could not drink from that one. She simply wanted to see the “colored water,” an innocent curiosity of a young child who did not know anything about racial prejudice. “I couldn’t understand it,” she says. “As I got older, I understood why it was...”<sup>75</sup>

Black music producer and performer Lou Ragland lived in the Central and Hough areas and attended schools that were approximately ninety percent black. He had a mix of friends, including a close friend who was Polish-American. “I didn’t find out he was white until I was sixteen,” when some of his black friends began to hassle him about it, Ragland explains.<sup>76</sup> Singer George Hendricks, who moved to Cleveland from Bessemer, Alabama, at age seven, also had a close white friend. “We never looked at him as anybody but Eddie,” Hendricks says. Living in the South showed him the ugly side of humanity, but he also believes that racism provided a feeling of isolation for both black and white since there was no mixing of races. Once he moved to Cleveland, Hendricks says he did not experience racism until much older when he started traveling with his band and performing on the predominantly white West Side of the city. This was also his first contact with significant numbers of non-blacks, having grown up on the East Side.<sup>77</sup>

Where one lived in the Greater Cleveland area clearly had an impact on a child’s perception of racial attitudes, whatever one’s parents taught them at home about treating others equally and with respect. Groups like the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ), which had bestowed upon Cleveland an award for improvements in race relations for 1951, continued to promote diversity and understanding among children in

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<sup>75</sup> Joan Orosz, interview by author, Solon, Ohio, November 8, 2009.

<sup>76</sup> Lou Ragland, telephone interview by author, November 7, 2009.

<sup>77</sup> George Hendricks, interview by author, Cleveland, Ohio, October 28, 2009.

the region. Camp Roundup held its third annual event in August 1953, which was sponsored by the Cleveland Round Table of the NCCJ. It brought together sixty boys from various religious, racial, and ethnic groups in the area for horseback riding, swimming, outdoor cooking, and singing.<sup>78</sup> That summer, however, there was rampant discrimination on Cleveland's beaches. The *Call and Post* examined the issue in its August 22<sup>nd</sup> piece entitled "What's Wrong with Cleveland in the Summertime?" The author describes Cleveland as having been "kissed by one of the Great Lakes," but that visitors looking "to escape the rigors of segregation" in the warmer months will be disheartened upon arriving in the city since "Old Man Jim Crow gets in some of his best licks of the year" at that time.

Cleveland was filled with contradictions. Redlining and blockbusting were common practices, discouraging black families from integrating neighborhoods and schools in Greater Cleveland. Though the schools were never legally segregated in the city, the effects de facto segregation on students were clear. But the Community Relations Board, National Conference of Christians and Jews, Cleveland's branch of the NAACP (which became, in 1953, the nation's largest chapter<sup>79</sup>) and other likeminded organizations attempted to enlighten Greater Clevelanders and bridge the racial, religious, and ethnic gaps that plagued the region. Many parents of all backgrounds were teaching their children to treat people the way they wished to be treated, while some were handing down their prejudices to the next generation.

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<sup>78</sup> "Christians-Jews Group at Camp," *Plain Dealer*, August 7, 1953.

<sup>79</sup> "What Happened in Cleveland in 1953," *Call and Post*, January 2, 1954.

Even if the majority of Clevelanders were not prejudiced, not enough were speaking out publicly against the reality of racism, as the *Call and Post* pointed out in an editorial on June 15, 1954:

...It is surprising how supposedly strong people seem so weak and helpless when bigots get in their dirty work. Privately these so-called fair-minded citizens decry the acts of bigots and seek to make amends to their victims. But, to speak out against them and go on record as being opposed to their kind of slime, no. This is the weakness in our fight against bigotry. Too many so-called good people are unwilling to expose them or stand up and be counted as their opponents.<sup>80</sup>

Part of what may have drawn some white youths to black music was the racism of their parents' generation and the inability or unwillingness of many non-racist whites to speak out against bigotry. Music was one venue through which young people created a more tolerant and inclusive society, though that was not the original intent or the appeal of rock and roll. In the Jim Crow South there were many whites who were not marching with the Ku Klux Klan or spitting at black children trying to attend integrated schools. Singer Bill Spoon, who is black, came to Cleveland at age eighteen having grown up in Bessemer, Alabama, a town with a strong KKK presence. Though less than a quarter of Bessemer's white residents were involved with the Klan, Spoon says, the other three-quarters of white citizens did not speak out against racism until shortly before Spoon headed to the North in 1960. His grandmother, a deeply religious woman who taught him "spiritual laws" of life, tried preparing him for the real world. "She told me, no matter where I go, as long as I treated people the way I want to be treated, whatever the circumstance...then I would have to react when I would be treated differently than I wanted to be treated," he remembers.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> "The Bigots In Our Ranks," *Call and Post*, June 15, 1954.

<sup>81</sup> Spoon, interview.

### *A Malicious Campaign*

Disk jockey Alan Freed, however, was doing his part for race relations in Cleveland, though he did not recognize his role as such. He continued to play black artists on his WJW radio program six nights a week and he took his Moondog revues to venues around Northeast Ohio in the years following the disastrous 1952 event. But with all of this success came criticism from black and white parents, teachers, clergy, and others who feared the music's effect on youth. There was no doubt to Freed or to those who protested the new big beat that the roots of rock and roll were black. The language used to describe the music, and many of its fans, in the early days makes it clear. The music was "primitive" and "animalistic." The fans were "natives," "hepcats," and "zoot suiters" (codes for black youth). And, of course, they were sexually depraved, which brought out old fears of black men ravaging defenseless white women. But references to the sexual depravity thought to be inspired by this beat-driven music were also used to scare adults; one headline from February 23, 1956 reads "Rock 'n' Roll Orgy Surges," and the article describes an "invasion" of kids crowding a New York theatre to see Alan Freed's latest rock and roll-filled film.<sup>82</sup>

The racism inherent in much of the criticism aimed at the music and at Freed himself did not go unrecognized at the time. Freed wrote a thoughtful and provocative editorial in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in the mid-1950s in which he says

this campaign against "Rock 'n' Roll" smells of discrimination of the worst kind against the great and accomplished Negro song writers, musicians and singers who are responsible for this outstanding contribution to American music. It is American! And, people throughout our nation can look forward to the day when they will be able to see on their TV screens and eventually in person, the famous Negro artists, who have brought us the "off-spring" of the only basic American musical heritage we can call our own. It has been nurtured and has grown through

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<sup>82</sup> Unidentified article from 1956, <http://www.alanfreed.com/> (accessed 19 February 2010).

oppressions, prejudices, narrow-minded bigotry and through such critic inflicted terminologies as “Race Music” and “Honky Tonk Rhythm and Blues.”<sup>83</sup>

His defenders also pointed out, albeit more forcefully than Freed himself, the role that he played in promoting the artists “that intellectuals of more than a decade ago dubbed ‘primitives,’ and ‘off beat’.” In short, Freed brought black music to white audiences, specifically teenagers, and his supporters made sure he got credit for it.<sup>84</sup> He twice won the *Pittsburgh Courier*’s brotherhood award, yet did not feel that he was a civil rights activist in any sense. “I’m no champion of the Negro people just because they are Negro,” he explained. “Of Negro music, yes. Because it’s honest, not because it’s Negro.”<sup>85</sup>

In 1954 Freed landed a high-paying job at WINS in New York City. *Billboard* noted at the time that Freed’s recent Moondog Birthday Ball at the Akron Armory drew an audience of 3,100 fans, over one-third of whom were “white teen-agers—the nation’s increasingly rhythm and blues music audience.”<sup>86</sup> When he moved his show to New York he was able to promote black-inspired music to a far larger market just a few months after the Supreme Court made the *Brown* decision to desegregate public schools. This confluence of forces increased racial strife by attacking race relations and tradition in the North and South. Northern states likely did not feel that the decision affected them directly as there were not Jim Crow-type laws in place to separate black and white children in schools or to keep black and white adults from sitting next to each other on

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<sup>83</sup> Alan Freed, “The Big Beat,” Izzy Rowe’s Notebook, *The Pittsburgh Courier*. The Official Alan Freed Website. <http://www.alanfreed.com/> (accessed April 24, 2009). It must be noted that much of the text of this piece appeared in another article circa 1955 that was attributed to Ray Parris, “Our Kids Want Good, Wholesome Rock;” the pdf file of this article appears on the official Alan Freed website without citation information and is incomplete. Since Freed was known to be less than honest about his life it is important to understand that some statements attributed to him may not be accurate, complete, or true.

<sup>84</sup> “A Salute to Alan Freed,” *Rock and Roll Roundup*, February 1957, 17.

<sup>85</sup> “Alan Freed,” Alan Freed Presents The Big Beat program, 1958, 2.

<sup>86</sup> “Moondog to WINS: Freed Freed of WJW, To Start in N.Y. in Fall,” *Billboard*, July 10, 1954, 15.

buses, in restaurants, and other public places. Political leaders in southern states declared their open hostility toward and defiance of the law to integrate schools “with all deliberate speed.” State legislatures declared *Brown* “null and void,” funding was pulled from the few schools that dared to allow black and white children to learn together, and teaching licenses were revoked from teachers of integrated classes. The NAACP, which had pursued the *Brown* case, was harassed by southern legislatures in an effort to destroy them and their influence. Many NAACP branches were shut down, though black churches often stepped in to take the place of the group in order to keep organizing and fundraising efforts alive.<sup>87</sup>

Young people were making their ideas about race known in a public way, perhaps for the first time. Just a few months before *Brown* a group of Cleveland high school and college students at the Junior Round Table, part of the Seventh Annual Institute on Human Relations, declared that “Prejudice is being down on what you’re not up on.” They also concluded that parents were at fault for stalling progress on racial understanding, because many of them did not have early opportunities to interact with people of other races. Since modern young people had such “advantages,” the panel observed, they understand that there are good people in all races and they feel they each “have a job to do to convert their parents.” Young people must be strong enough to do what they believe is right so they will not be led astray toward bigotry and delinquency, and education was believed to be the best way to combat segregation. “Think it and then do it,” they urged.<sup>88</sup> There has always been a natural conflict between generations, but this gap was bigger, louder, and had a better beat to it.

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<sup>87</sup> Bruce J. Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2004), 24.

<sup>88</sup> Woody L. Taylor, “High School, College Youths Want FEP Law,” *Call and Post*, February 27, 1954.

As the popularity of the music Freed helped bring to young Clevelanders continued to grow and the term *rock and roll* was becoming common knowledge, Cleveland continued to struggle with racial conflicts. There were multiple incidents of vandalism and threats against black residents moving into white areas of the Mount Pleasant and Glenville neighborhoods in the autumn and winter of 1954.<sup>89</sup> What the kids at the Junior Round Table realized about the origins of racial prejudice was easily applied to how critics felt about rock and roll. Freed wrote in 1956 that “it was inevitable that those who neither understand nor appreciate this great contribution to American music would wage a malicious campaign against it.”<sup>90</sup> He was right.

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<sup>89</sup> Marty Richardson, “Bigots Stone Home in Mount Pleasant Area,” *Call and Post*, September 18, 1954; “Vandals Attack Again, Hurl Huge Rocks into St. Clair Area Home,” *Call and Post*, December 25, 1954.

<sup>90</sup> Unidentified article from 1956, <http://www.alanfreed.com/> (accessed 19 February 2010).



### CHAPTER III

#### ROCK AND ROLL IS HERE TO STAY

The post-Second World War era marked the first time that many teenagers did not have to work to help support their families. It was indeed a period of relative prosperity for white Americans, and the black middle class was also developing in pockets around the nation. Young people could now dream in earnest of going off to college instead of off to war, or to work in the family business. Some teens received an allowance from their parents, and many picked up after-school or summer jobs to earn their own spending money. Teenagers now had disposable income, and were choosing to spend much of it on music, mainly 45 rpm records and jukeboxes. In fact, teenagers became the largest consumers of 45s and in turn helped push black artists to the tops of the popular music charts. 45s were one of the most significant factors in the purchasing power of teens; they were easy to carry, inexpensive, and one could buy records from a variety of artists without having to commit to a long-play album. As of 1957 teenagers were buying

ninety percent of all singles, and record companies were working overtime to fill the demand for more.<sup>91</sup>

The powerful teenage market was recognized by artists and music industry professionals; *Billboard* reported that the nation's sixteen million teens were projected to spend over nine billion dollars in 1958, and were considered "the record industry's best customer."<sup>92</sup> Rock and roll was still controversial with many adults, but Ed Sullivan and Steve Allen brought rock acts into American living rooms every week. The use of teenagers and rock music in major motion pictures increased accordingly—twelve "rock and roll movies" were made in 1957, compared to about three in previous years. Sell-out concert tours were giving young Americans of all races the opportunity to see their favorite performers in person. Perry Como, Nat "King" Cole, and even Frank Sinatra had recorded versions of rock songs or songs with a rock and roll flavor. Alan Freed continued to defend the music and the kids who loved it, saying in 1957 that rock and roll was here to stay. "It's being integrated into America's musical scene," he stated. "In fact, it's become bigger than all of us. What more can I say?"<sup>93</sup>

The music clearly had the power to make kids spend their allowances and money from after-school jobs on records and fan memorabilia, but what else could it do? Anti-rock activists still blamed the music for criminal behavior, sexual depravity, and high school drop-outs, and there were many headlines declaring that the music was dying or dead—and that it was alive and well and living in your teenager's bedroom. "The Rock Is Solid" declared a *Time* headline in 1957. The article laments rock and roll's staying

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<sup>91</sup> Irwin, 57.

<sup>92</sup> Ralph Freas, "Young Spenders: How to Capture a Bigger Share of the Teen Market," *Billboard*, December 16, 1957, 31.

<sup>93</sup> Alan Freed, "Rock 'n Roll—1957," Alan Freed Christmas Jubilee program, 1957-1958, 2.

power. “For two years, lovers of peace, quiet and a less epileptic kind of minstrelsy have waited for Elvis Presley and the adenoidal art form, rock ‘n’ roll, to fade,” it said, acknowledging that deejays and other music industry professionals offered “little hope” to those who preferred “good” music. The use of the term *minstrelsy* indicates that the racial element of the music and of Presley’s style was still very much a concern for critics. The writer presents the music as simply another teen fad that has overstayed its welcome, and he quotes a Chicago disk jockey to illustrate his point: “Rock ‘n’ roll is still as strong as ever, and we’ll have to live with it until the kids find a new sound.”<sup>94</sup>

National magazines were writing articles about rock and roll and teenagers as if they were inseparable, which, in fact, they were.<sup>95</sup> Rock and roll superstars Bill Haley and His Comets provide the opening song, “(We’re Gonna) Rock Around the Clock,” for the 1955 teen drama *Blackboard Jungle*, a film that highlights issues of race and juvenile delinquency at an integrated inner city vocational school. Many were outraged by the film, but controversy quickly turned into dollars at the box office. Loew’s State Theatre in Cleveland advertised in April that *Blackboard Jungle* had been held over for a third week, boasting that “67,445 Clevelanders have been shocked by this startling drama of teen age terror in the schools.”<sup>96</sup> American Ambassador to Italy Clare Booth Luce, who had not seen the film, requested that it be removed from the Venice Film Festival because of its unflattering portrayal of American schools. Luce also claimed that the film

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<sup>94</sup> “Music: The Rock Is Solid,” *Time*, November 4, 1957  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,867877,00.html> (accessed January 12, 2010).

<sup>95</sup> “Music: New Pop Records, Apr. 4, 1955,” *Time*, April 4, 1955,  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,866139,00.html> (accessed January 12, 2010).

<sup>96</sup> Loew’s State Theatre advertisement for *Blackboard Jungle*, *Plain Dealer*, April 8, 1955.

promoted “Italian Communist anti-U.S. propaganda,” and, thanks to the red scare of the 1950s, *Blackboard Jungle* was pulled from the festival.<sup>97</sup>

Teen fashion and lingo were also the subjects of news stories like a *Plain Dealer* article entitled “Real Bikini Isn’t for Prehistoric,” in which the reader learns that things that are no longer good are called “crusted” and that the unhip are “cubes.”<sup>98</sup> The *Call and Post* began running the “Where Teens Are Seen” column in 1955 and “Covering the Teen Clubs” in 1956 as sort of society columns for the hippest teens in Cleveland, highlighting favorite songs, who went to what dances, and the latest slang that seemed to come into fashion every week.<sup>99</sup> *Call and Post* writer William Jackson met up with a group of black teenagers one Saturday night on the corner of Quincy and East 55<sup>th</sup> Street in order “to get into one of their jive conversations” and find out what they thought about Cleveland. They confessed that they were hanging out on the corner because there was no place for them to go and drink sodas and dance. The youth agencies around the city were alright, the kids explained to Jackson, but they were too “pious” for their tastes. All they wanted was a place to go to have “good clean fun.” “A lot of folks claim we are bad and make a lot of noise,” one teenager told him. “Why don’t they do something for us and cut out all the loud talk about juvenile delinquency?” another asked.<sup>100</sup>

Juvenile delinquency was often blamed at least in part on rock and roll, though it is difficult to prove that music itself causes young people to commit crimes and drop out of school. Parents disliked the music for other reasons as well: the beat, the objectionable

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<sup>97</sup> Jim Dawson, *Rock Around the Clock: The Record That Started the Rock Revolution* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2005), 121.

<sup>98</sup> “Real Bikini Isn’t for Prehistoric,” *Plain Dealer*, April 14, 1955.

<sup>99</sup> Where Teens Are Seen, *Call and Post*, August 27, 1955; Bob and Betty White, Covering the Teen Clubs, *Call and Post*, May 19, 1956.

<sup>100</sup> William Jackson, “Around the Heart of the City With Youth,” *Call and Post*, August 27, 1955.

“leer-ics,” the suggestive dancing of performers. Thought by many parents and educators to be simply a fad, rock and roll, which was created by black artists and originally performed for black audiences, was at once condemned and promoted by the media once white teenagers made it their own. Teenagers were now targeted by the music industry and the press, as well as the advertising industry. “There was so much change so quickly fueled by the media that it scared older people,” says Mike Olszewski, newscaster and author.<sup>101</sup> The music appeared to be an easy target for adults looking to explain young people’s bad behavior.

The reasons teens were attracted to the music were a combination of the things their parents hated, on top of the freedom the music represented and the belief that this music was made for them. When asked in 1957 why rock and roll was so appealing to teenagers, Alan Freed explained that it was “Because R&R is to a large extent music by, for and about teenagers, a relationship other musical forms are not offering.”<sup>102</sup> Sheila Blecman agrees. “[It] was...for the young people, and it was something new that we could grab onto and own,” she says. Popular recording stars like Frank Sinatra and Nat “King” Cole, for example, were still embraced by many young people, but others, like Lynn Tolliver, equated them with old age. The new style of music was speaking to teenagers, despite criticism from parents. “The same music that they shunned, probably is the same music that brought people together,” Tolliver says. White and black music fans enjoyed songs by performers of either race, because, Tolliver explains, “When music touches your soul, there’s nothing you can do about it—you’re controlled by it.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Mike Olszewski, email message to author, February 3, 2009.

<sup>102</sup> Roland E. Lindbloom, “TV Big Beat Rocks ‘n’ Rolls Tonight,” *Newark, N.J. News*, July 12, 1957.

<sup>103</sup> Tolliver, interview.

### *The King of Rock and Roll*

Elvis Presley was instrumental to the popularity of rock and roll with teenagers, and he helped maintain its chart dominance through controversy and the natural ebbs and tides of the music industry. “Elvis was the one that really changed everything,” says Blecman. “We made [the music] our own, Elvis was ours. He didn’t belong to our parents—he belonged to us.”<sup>104</sup> George Hendricks and his friends were also Presley fans. “I used to love his movies. I used to dream I was Elvis,” he recalls. “[He] had all the girls!”<sup>105</sup> Hendricks’ appreciation of Presley is contrary to contemporary discourse about his lack of appeal among black music fans. Bill Spoon was also a fan, though he acknowledges that Presley’s early popularity “was not a good time for black artists,” since the custom of whites recording their own versions of songs originally recorded by black performers continued after Presley’s versions of “Hound Dog” (originally recorded by Big Mama Thornton) and “That’s All Right, Mama” (originally by Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup) became hit records. The first song Spoon remembers really enjoying was Presley’s “Love Me Tender,” and he also feels that Presley did a nice job interpreting black movements and dances when he performed live.<sup>106</sup> Northeast Ohioan A. Joshua Sims says that his mother’s first impression of rock and roll was seeing Elvis on television in the 1950s. Her father thought Presley was vulgar and quickly turned the channel, wondering “Why would anyone want to dance like a nigger?”<sup>107</sup> Such racist language was often used by those who despised Presley and rock and roll, leading some

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<sup>104</sup> Blecman, interview.

<sup>105</sup> Hendricks, interview.

<sup>106</sup> Spoon, interview.

<sup>107</sup> A. Joshua Sims, email to author, September 26, 2009.

to fear that if their white daughters were so enamored of Presley and his “black” dance moves, they were not so far from pursuing the black men who originated the style.

As a poor white southerner Presley lived in similar economic circumstances to most black southerners. His religious upbringing influenced his racial attitudes which, despite contemporary urban myths, were quite progressive. Presley was uninterested in politics and rarely spoke in any direct way about civil rights, but his very essence, his ability to easily communicate with and relate to blacks and whites as a southerner, was inherently political. This did not go unnoticed by many in the black community. “He was more liberal to black people than any of the other artists that I know of. Period,” declares singer Lou Ragland.<sup>108</sup> The popular black magazine *Tan* praised Presley in 1957 for not keeping secret “his respect for the work of the Negroes, nor of their influence on his own singing. Furthermore, he does not shun them, either in public or private.” Even Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver later gave him credit for daring to “[consort] on a human level with blacks” in an open fashion.<sup>109</sup> The *Call and Post* published a portion of a sermon by Dr. Milton Perry, pastor of the Deliverance Temple in Jersey City, New Jersey in 1957, in which he expressed admiration for Presley’s racial views. Dr. Perry provides examples of Presley’s devotion to charity events benefiting black children as well as his gracious attitude toward his black fans. “It would be good for America if Presley’s legions of devotees in the South and other parts of the nation emulated his attitude,” the pastor asserted.<sup>110</sup>

WERE disk jockey Tommy Edwards had been playing Presley’s records for months when he guaranteed Presley’s manager Bob Neal that there was a large market for his

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<sup>108</sup> Ragland, interview.

<sup>109</sup> Bertrand, 108.

<sup>110</sup> Dr. Milton Perry, “A Minister in Defense of Elvis,” *Call and Post*, January 19, 1957.

music in Cleveland. The influx of black and white southerners who came to Cleveland after the war made the city a hotbed of “hillbilly” music as well as rhythm and blues. It seemed only natural that Presley’s first performance in the North was his February 26, 1955 appearance at the Circle Theatre Jamboree on Euclid Avenue in Cleveland. The Circle was part movie theatre, part nightclub, and featured live rhythm and blues and country and western performers.<sup>111</sup> The *Call and Post* regularly ran advertisements for the Circle’s Sunday rhythm and blues revues, as well as for concert films featuring “rock and roll stars” like Lionel Hampton, Duke Ellington, and Dinah Washington, who were more commonly regarded as jazz or rhythm and blues performers.<sup>112</sup> By the time of Presley’s first show there, it appears to have been more marketable to advertise them as rock acts.

Presley’s show went well, with the usual large turnout of screaming teenagers even though his label, Sun Records, did not distribute their recordings in the region; his early Cleveland audiences responded based entirely on radio play. But Edwards and Neal, ever the entrepreneurs, set up shop in the lobby of the Circle and sold a decent amount of the records Neal had brought from Memphis in his car.<sup>113</sup> Since Edwards, nicknamed “the City Slicker Turned Country Boy,” hosted his radio Hillbilly Jamboree and was hosting the Circle show, it is likely that most if not all of the audience was white. It was certainly not unheard of in those days for black music fans to enjoy country and western and hillbilly music, but it is unknown how many black Clevelanders would have attended such an event in 1955 given the segregation of most nightlife in the city.

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<sup>111</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1994), 175.

<sup>112</sup> “Array Of Stars In ‘Rock ‘N Roll Revue,’” *Call and Post*, September 3, 1955.

<sup>113</sup> Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 175-176.



In October of that year Presley again performed in an all-star country jamboree at the Circle Theatre, followed the next day by a performance at Brooklyn High School in the Cleveland suburbs. Disk jockey Bill Randle arranged for the afternoon show at the school and an evening concert at St. Michael's Hall to be filmed for a short movie as he had previously done with Peggy Lee, Benny Goodman, and Stan Kenton. Again, little is known about the racial composition of the audience at St. Michael's Hall, but census records of the city and photos of the teenage audience at Brooklyn High School indicate all attendees were white.<sup>114</sup> Though Presley's Cleveland audiences may have been mostly white at the time, the fact that rising star Presley had appeared in Cleveland several times in 1955, this time with national recording artists like Bill Haley and Pat Boone, shows that Cleveland was considered a major music city.<sup>115</sup> Appearing on the same bill with Haley and Boone speaks to Presley's talent and the potential seen in him by concert promoters. *Time* declared Randle the top deejay in the country that year, and recognized Cleveland as one of five major markets that recording artists need to conquer on their way to national success.<sup>116</sup>

### ***Hail, Hail Rock and Roll***

Cleveland had plenty of nightclubs to accommodate rock and roll performers. The Circle Theatre and Gleason's Music Bar were two of the top spots for black rock and roll and rhythm and blues artists to perform for black audiences. Bo Diddley, whom the *Call*

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<sup>114</sup>James V. Roy, "Brooklyn School Auditorium," Scotty Moore, The Official Website <http://scottymoore.net/brooklynoh.html> (accessed March 6, 2010). The city of Brooklyn is on Cleveland's southwest side which was overwhelmingly white. At the time of the 1960 census there were less than 30 black residents between Brooklyn and Brooklyn Heights townships.

<sup>115</sup> Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 221.

<sup>116</sup> "Music: Top Jock," *Time*, February 14, 1955, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,807032,00.html> (accessed March 1, 2010).

*and Post* referred to as “one of the foremost agents of Blues Rhythm and of Rock ‘n Roll,” had appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and Steve Allen’s *Tonight Show* by the time he performed at Gleason’s in January 1956.<sup>117</sup> The Circle Theatre presented the Rock ‘N Roll Cavalcade in April, an event featuring Roy Brown, Little Willie John, and the Five Royales along with other acts in “the biggest parade of talent ever made across the Circle stage.”<sup>118</sup> In May the Cleveland Arena hosted an “outstanding progressive Rock and Roll Show” which showcased an integrated cast of artists: LaVern Baker, Clyde McPhatter, Bill Haley and His Comets, Frankie Lymon and The Teen Agers, The Drifters and many more popular groups of 1956.<sup>119</sup> These events and many others were advertised in the *Call and Post*, but few such concerts were given space in the *Plain Dealer* or *Cleveland Press*, which still preferred motion picture advertisements. These “white” papers were not necessarily ignoring the new teen phenomenon, but it appeared they did not wish to take part in its promotion, at least not when many of the venues were in black parts of town.

Mainstream papers may have preferred to stay away from rock and roll in part because of its increasingly negative reputation nationally. A religious group in Boston in 1956 instructed its members not to attend Alan Freed’s upcoming revue because they considered rock and roll “the devil’s music.”<sup>120</sup> So-called riots were reported in various cities in the years following the first Moondog Coronation Ball, including “mass youth hysteria” at a New York City showing of the Freed film “Don’t Knock the Rock” in

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<sup>117</sup> “Bo-Diddly Leads Band into Gleason’s Mon.,” *Call and Post*, January 7, 1956.

<sup>118</sup> “Sell Advance Tickets for Circle Theatre’s Rock ‘n Roll Show,” *Call and Post*, April 7, 1956.

<sup>119</sup> “Rock and Roll Show At The Arena May 8,” *Call and Post*, April 28, 1956.

<sup>120</sup> New York Beat, *Jet*, July 14, 1955, 63.

1957.<sup>121</sup> Similar incidents in other American cities and in Vancouver, London, and Australia contributed to rock and roll's bad reputation.<sup>122</sup> On *Alan Freed's Big Beat*, which aired nationally on ABC television, black singer Frankie Lymon danced with a white girl from the studio audience. This incident, which Freed likely did not notice, created a furor among ABC's southern affiliates; the show's sponsors demanded that only white performers appear from then on, and when Freed refused, the show was cancelled.<sup>123</sup>

The backlash against rock and roll was going strong in Cleveland as WERE's Edwards experienced at a church dance. He had intended to distribute thousands of free photos of Presley but was warned against it by church officials, and was also told not to play Presley's music or to show five pictures of him in a slide show during intermission. In January 1957 "the dumbest riot of teen-age kids" in one police officer's career broke out at the downtown Hippodrome Theatre during a Sunday matinee of the Jayne Mansfield comedy *The Girl Can't Help It*. The film features a rock and roll soundtrack, and the *Call and Post* reported that the "disturbances" reached their peaks when black performers Fats Domino and Little Richard appeared onscreen. A multiracial group of teenagers watched the movie together and about one hundred of them were involved in the riot. Captain Arthur Roth, head of the Cleveland Police Department's Juvenile Bureau, declared that the incident was not racially motivated in any way, as if one should assume otherwise.<sup>124</sup> Alan Freed, as usual, stood up for the music—and for teenagers.

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<sup>121</sup> James McGlinicy and James Donahue, "Rock 'n' Roll Madness, Mass Youth Hysteria at Paramount Theatre," *Daily Mirror*, February 23, 1957.

<sup>122</sup> Ruth Banks Hoffman, "Rock 'n Roll Wows B'way," *Call and Post*, March 2, 1957.

<sup>123</sup> Jackson, 168.

<sup>124</sup> Marty Richardson, "It Wasn't Racial! 'Teen-Agers' Moved by Rock & Roll Flicker," *Call and Post*, January 26, 1957.

“No music is immoral,” he said in 1957. “Rock ’n’ Roll doesn’t make kids delinquents. It keeps them from delinquency.”<sup>125</sup>

Teenagers often cited the beat of the music as what they liked about it; the beat was what critics referred to as *primitive* and *tribal*, able to stir evil in the hearts of American youth. The other thing that teens enjoyed and detractors attacked was the lyrical content. Chuck Berry was one of the most celebrated rock stars in the music’s early days, and his lyrics in particular appealed to teens because they talked about experiences every young person could relate to. His anthemic “School Days,” released in 1957, was *Billboard*’s number three Territorial Best Seller in Cleveland in April. The lyrics describe a typical day in the life of the American teenager:<sup>126</sup>

Up in the mornin' and out to school  
The teacher is teachin' the Golden Rule  
American history and practical math  
You study' em hard and hopin' to pass  
Workin' your fingers right down to the bone  
And the guy behind you won't leave you alone

Ring ring goes the bell  
The cook in the lunchroom's ready to sell  
You're lucky if you can find a seat  
You're fortunate if you have time to eat  
Back in the classroom open your books  
Gee but the teacher don't know  
How mean she looks

Soon as three o'clock rolls around  
You finally lay your burden down  
Close up your books, get out of your seat

Down the halls and into the street  
Up to the corner and 'round the bend  
Right to the juke joint you go in

Drop the coin right into the slot

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<sup>125</sup> Sidney Fields, “Only Human,” Alan Freed Easter Jubilee program, April 1957, 2.

<sup>126</sup> Territorial Best Sellers, *Billboard*, April 29, 1957, 46.

You gotta hear something that's really hot

With the one you love you're makin' romance  
All day long you been  
Wantin' to dance  
Feelin' the music from head to toe  
'Round and 'round and 'round you go

Hail, hail rock'n'roll  
Deliver me from the days of old  
Long live rock'n'roll  
The beat of the drum is loud and bold  
Rock rock rock'n'roll  
The feelin' is there body and soul<sup>127</sup>

The song was written from Berry's own memories of school. "The lyrics depict the way it was in my own time," he writes in his 1987 autobiography. "I had no idea what was going on in the classes during the time I composed it...." Berry was a thirty-year-old man when "School Days" was climbing up the record charts, yet his own school experiences were easily relatable to a younger audience who understood precisely what he was singing about. His 1958 song "Little Queenie" was also directed at "the teen market which had gone so well for me." It told the story of a young man noticing a young lady he is too shy to approach at a dance, another experience many teenagers shared. "Such was the kind of product I was aiming for in most of my lyrics rather than a story that depicted a singular episode or incident that could only happen in the life of a few people," Berry explains.<sup>128</sup>

Berry understood that his lyrics were universal, but he also realized that not everyone appreciated the way he and other rock performers related to young people, especially if they were white. "...I don't know any truths about racial matters but what I have seen,"

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<sup>127</sup> Chuck Berry, "Lyrics: 'School Days'," The Official Site of Chuck Berry, <http://www.chuckberry.com/music/lyrics/school.htm> (accessed March 6, 2010).

<sup>128</sup> Chuck Berry, *The Autobiography* (New York: Fireside, 1987), 152,162.

Berry confesses. That is all any human can know, but the experiences of a black recording star in 1950s America are certainly worth examining. Berry performed with an all-black concert tour in 1955, and noticed no racial bigotry as they traveled throughout the North. Having grown up in St. Louis, Missouri, Berry knew little about the South except what he had heard from his father, so the racism he encountered was quite strange to him once the tour reached Charleston, West Virginia. It was in Jacksonville, Florida, however, that the overt racism of Jim Crow truly made an impression. Band members were referred to as “boy” by stagehands, and the center aisle of the venue was roped off so that the white and black attendees, who were separated on either side of the room, could not mingle. As the show ended, Berry remembers that twice as many white as black youth rushed the stage to join the performers. Surprisingly, security forces did not react, and “could only stand there and watch young public opinion exercise its reaction to the boundaries they were up against.” This incident made Berry realize that there had been some progress in race relations.<sup>129</sup>

White audiences continued to react enthusiastically to him, though blacks in the same audience often responded more fervently when he played what they felt was straight rhythm and blues as opposed to watered-down rock and roll. In Mobile, Alabama, whites applauded when he sang “Maybellene,” which reached number five on the *Billboard* Hot 100 popular music chart in 1955; the song also reached number one on *Billboard*’s Rhythm and Blues chart, indicating that black music fans enjoyed the song as much, if not more than mainstream audiences. Berry noticed that the black members of the audience were more excited to hear him play “Wee Wee Hours,” a rhythm and blues song which was the B-side of “Maybellene.” “I knew I was getting next to them,” he writes,

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<sup>129</sup> Berry, 121-24.

remembering “how beautifully the black side began to moan” while listening to “the pleading guitar passage of ‘Wee Wee Hours’,” a song that had not been “Anglopinionated,” as Berry describes songs that were considered to have been whitened for the pop charts.<sup>130</sup> This was a common practice in rock and roll at the time, and Berry believes that black music fans understood it and often disapproved of it, even if it was a black performer playing their own music. In this way, the music was not necessarily bringing together black and white fans as much as it was bringing white fans to black music in a style they could appreciate.

### ***With All Deliberate Speed***

While rock and roll continued to grow in popularity and cause controversy across the country, few schools had been desegregated in the years since *Brown*. At Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, nine of the seventy-five black students who applied to attend the newly-desegregated school were finally permitted to enroll in the fall of 1957. Many white citizens of Little Rock were furious and unwilling to allow their children to attend an integrated school. Governor Orval Faubus claimed that threats of violence by segregationists created an unsafe atmosphere for Little Rock citizens and he ordered the delay of “forcible integration,” saying that “blood will run in the streets” if black students tried to enter Central High School. Hundreds of National Guardsmen surrounded the school on the first day and the students stayed away. This continued for three weeks until September 25<sup>th</sup>, when the Little Rock Nine, as they now were called, were escorted by federal troops as they entered the school. Though many students held the same racist views as their parents there were many who did not, and they blamed adults for creating

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<sup>130</sup> Berry, 334, 125-126.

such racial tension. One white student told reporter Mike Wallace that opposing integration is “downright un-American” and that it is “the most terrible thing I’ve ever seen in America....I always thought all men were created equal.”<sup>131</sup> Many others may have felt the same way but were afraid to share their views, though this statement indicates that equality and integration were important topics to the younger generation.

The Little Rock drama was played out in a very public way, with every form of media across the United States and the world covering the story. NBC-TV broadcasted the students’ successful entrance into Central High School live on September 25<sup>th</sup>.<sup>132</sup>

“Television and music...was playing a big part” in the awareness of social and political issues, believes John Wilson.<sup>133</sup> Television’s role in the exposure of rock and roll to the masses is comparable to its significance in the civil rights movement, as people outside the South were now able to see these events for themselves. Even those living in the South who disagreed with segregationists were getting their voices out through television and newspapers, having recognized that times were changing and that media attention on southern bigotry was painting the region in a negative light for all the world to see.

Southern teenagers spoke out against racism in the months following Little Rock. White members from thirty schools in the National Student Association (NSA) urged the return of Dorothy Counts, the first black student at Charlotte, North Carolina’s high school. Counts, like many black students attempting to attend newly-desegregated schools, was abused and humiliated and eventually withdrew from classes. *The Southern Patriot*, a publication of the Southern Conference Education Fund, Inc., called the NSA’s actions

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<sup>131</sup> Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 96-112.

<sup>132</sup> “History on TV,” *Call and Post*, October 5, 1957.

<sup>133</sup> Wilson, interview.



on behalf of Counts “The brightest news in the South in recent weeks,” and gave credit to both high school and college students for participating in the fight for equality.<sup>134</sup>

Some adults spoke their piece as well. Little Rock grocery store owner F.E. Pendergrass spoke to the press in the aftermath of the Central High School controversy. He expressed the views that many of those white citizens whom Bill Spoon grew up around in Bessemer, Alabama, were afraid to articulate until the late 1950s. “As far as I’m concerned, I see no difference,” Pendergrass said. “Can you tell me the difference in people?” He insisted that there was no harm in black and white children going to school together, and he also expressed concern for the people in Little Rock who spent so much energy being hateful and racist. Integration was inevitable, Pendergrass said, so people should just get used to it, “the sooner the better.” Once they realize that, integration will work. “I’m a good example. I believe in people—just people. I get along alright,” he remarked. “Everybody else can too.”<sup>135</sup> Attitudes appeared to be shifting in favor of integration; whether that was the result of increased media attention and exposure or people simply giving in to the inevitable, it is unclear. Young people appeared to be the most outspoken in support of desegregation, in the South and elsewhere, and some adults were following their lead.

National NAACP Secretary Walter White told *U.S. News and World Report* shortly after the Supreme Court’s *Brown* ruling that a natural outcome of people getting to know and respect one another is the development of interracial friendships and marriages. But he also said that there was no increase in such relationships in the states that never had

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<sup>134</sup> “Youth Actions Brighten South,” *The Southern Patriot* 16, no. 2 (February 1958): 1, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records, Cleveland, Ohio, 1924-1969, Container 54, MS 3520, Folder 6, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland.

<sup>135</sup> “Arkansas Farmer Talks About Racial Problems,” *Call and Post*, October 12, 1957.

segregation, so desegregation would not have a significant influence.<sup>136</sup> Segregationists believed otherwise, and in the South they often attacked rock and roll to make their point. White citizens councils regularly spoke out against what they saw as the obscenity of the “vulgar, animalistic, Nigger rock and roll bop” that provided “a means by which the white man and his children can be driven to the level with the Negro.”<sup>137</sup> In the summer of 1956, teenagers fought back against fifty members of the North Alabama Citizens’ Council who were picketing a “rock and bop show” featuring an integrated cast of performers in Birmingham; the youngsters displayed their own signs reading “Rock and roll is here to stay” and “Be-bop is for us.”<sup>138</sup> Since performers in the South played to segregated though often mixed audiences, the threat of race mixing was palpable. Columnist Ruth Cage wrote in 1955 that the music “is doing a job in the Deep South that even the U.S. Supreme Court hasn’t been able to accomplish.” She went on to explain that, wherever a concert featuring black performers played, “kids of every color will be rubbing elbows without creating friction. In some areas, areas where segregation is most controversial, audiences often will be half colored and half white, not in separate accommodations either.”<sup>139</sup>

Music critics like Cage recognized the larger implications of the popularity of black music, though the music was the most important element to the performers themselves. Black artists regularly encountered racism when performing in segregated areas, so the issue was more personal for them than for white fans. Still, facing bigotry was an

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<sup>136</sup> “What Negroes Want Now,” *U.S. News and World Report*, May 28, 1954, reprint, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records, Cleveland, Ohio, 1924-1969, Container 54, MS 3520, Folder 5, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland.

<sup>137</sup> Alabama White Citizens Council members quoted in Jackson, 96.

<sup>138</sup> “Teens Picket The Pickets Of Rock-Roll,” *Billboard*, June 2, 1956, 66.

<sup>139</sup> Ruth Cage, “Rhythm and Blues,” *Downbeat*, October 5, 1955, 18.

everyday experience in the lives of black Americans and some black stars did not feel that they had a particular duty to speak out. Entertainer Cab Calloway disagreed that performers should be central to the fight against racial discrimination, though stars like Lena Horne and Pearl Bailey felt an obligation to use their status to highlight the issue. Saxophonist Illinois Jacquet said in 1955 that black entertainers fight segregation each time they are booked into a musical venue, “because you help change the white man’s opinion of the Negro. They learn a lot of stereotyped things they’ve heard aren’t so.”<sup>140</sup> Statements like this make it clear that black performers were well aware of the impact they could have on society as a whole, separate from their musical talents.

There had always been outspoken advocates for racial equality, but those who were more confrontational were not leading the “official” civil rights movement. Louder voices started being heard by the end of the 1950s, from average citizens to celebrities. Singer LaVern Baker was frustrated by a common practice in the record industry and demanded that it be changed. She wrote to her congressman to protest copyright laws that allowed an artist’s material to be recorded by another without compensation. Such “musical theft” was common, with black performers the victims of whites looking to capitalize on the music blacks created. Thanks to Baker’s anger and action the law was changed, and many deejays began playing only the original recordings as Alan Freed always had always done. The fight was between black and white artists as well as between small record labels and the majors; black artists usually recorded for the smaller labels, and since their sound was now the dominant force in popular music they had an advantage in their fight for the right to be properly compensated.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> “Should Negro Stars Avoid Jim Crow Fights?,” *Jet*, March 17, 1955, 60-62.

<sup>141</sup> “LaVern Baker Halts Rock ‘n Roll Thefts,” *Call and Post*, June 7, 1958.

Race relations in Cleveland were keeping pace with the rest of the nation—that is, there were areas of improvement thanks to changing attitudes and laws, but five years after the *Brown* decision things were not noticeably different. *Call and Post* reader Melvin E. Lee wrote a militant letter to the editor in 1958 in which he compares racism to a cancer that “eats away at reason and destroys brotherhood,” and says that the Little Rock drama is only one piece of a system “so despicable, it would surely shame a nation of savages.” Lee directs his criticism as much at the black community as at the southern, white power structure that was keeping Jim Crow firmly in place. “When equality comes, if ever,” he writes, in words that applied to Cleveland as well as the South, “it will have to be won with blood sweat and tears. As a race, we lack sorely these qualities.” He adds, “We’re too busy concentrating on imitating those who despise us,” a line that could have come right out of the mouth of Malcolm X, and one which seems ironic given the fact that so many white rock and roll performers were accused of “acting black.” Lee puts his faith in the young people who may turn into “a better breed of men and women who are not afraid to fight for what is rightfully theirs.”<sup>142</sup>

### ***Hitsville, U.S.A.***

A series of events in the late fifties gave the anti-rock and roll forces hope that the music’s end was near. In 1957, Little Richard suddenly quit the music industry to become a minister, and he remained out of the public eye until 1962. Sam Cooke was the target of a paternity case, Jerry Lee Lewis scandalized the world by marrying his thirteen-year-old cousin, and Chuck Berry faced weapons and other charges in 1958. That same year, Elvis Presley entered the United States Army and was eventually stationed at a base

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<sup>142</sup> Melvin E. Lee, letter to the editor, *Call and Post*, May 17, 1958.

in Germany, where he remained until 1960. In his absence, many hoped that rock and roll and its influence over young people would finally fade away. Even Corporal Presley expressed concern over the state of the music that had brought him fame and fortune. "I'd be a fool not to pay some attention to it," he remarked from his Army base in West Germany. Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and The Big Bopper, were killed in a plane crash in February 1959. Berry faced additional morals charges in Mississippi that year, as did the four male members of The Platters in Cincinnati. By 1960, Alan Freed and other deejays were losing their jobs and sitting in front of federal juries as the payola scandal made national headlines.<sup>143</sup>

But rock and roll was hardly on its death bed. Teenagers were still buying millions of records a year as 1960 rolled in. *Billboard* continued to list rhythm and blues on its own chart, though the first Hot R&B Sides listing of the year included white artists like Bobby Darin, Guy Mitchell, and Conway Twitty. The *Billboard* Hot 100 chart gave its top spot to Marty Robbins' "El Paso," with Frankie Avalon right behind with "Why" at number two. The Hot 100 roster of artists was evenly split between black and white performers and featured a variety of musical styles.<sup>144</sup> White artists continued recording their own versions of rhythm and blues and rock and roll songs originally performed by black artists, but thanks to LaVern Baker's efforts in 1958 they had to pay for the rights to each song they recorded. Many teenage fans had never heard the original versions of the

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<sup>143</sup> Paul Friedlander, *Rock & Roll: A Social History, Second Edition* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2006), 38-39; "Sam Cooke Figures in Philly Paternity Case," *Call and Post*, April 5, 1958; Ed Ward, Geoffrey Stokes, and Ken Tucker, *Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock & Roll* (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1986), 178-180; "Rock 'N Roller Nabbed: Chuck Berry in Trouble," *Call and Post*, June 21, 1958; "Cops Say White Lad Tried To Arrange Berry Date," *Jet*, September 17, 1959, 12; Art Sears, Jr., "Platters' Career Spins on Morals Case Verdict," *Call and Post*, October 10, 1959; "Disk Jockeys: Now Don't Cry," *Time*, December 7, 1959, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,811531,00.html> (accessed March 8, 2010); "Rock 'n Roll: Decline & Fall?" *Time*, December 14, 1959, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,894364,00.html> (accessed January 12, 2010).

<sup>144</sup> *Billboard*, January 4, 1960, 52, 36.

songs getting radio play, but record store managers noticed that kids were starting to look for them. Such a “corruption” of rhythm and blues created a demand for the real thing, VeeJay Records general manager Ewart G. Abner, Jr. told *Billboard* in 1960. “Teenagers can recognize a genuine beat from a phony one,” the magazine reported.<sup>145</sup>

Some progress had been made by black performers seeking to reach wider audiences, though most were still working for record labels owned by whites, and many of their contracts were unsatisfactory. Black artists had reached a measure of success, but without a stronger voice over their own music, things had little chance of getting much better. In 1958, former boxer and record store owner Berry Gordy, Jr., borrowed eight hundred dollars from the Gordy family co-op, Ber-Berry, to produce Marv Johnson’s “Come to Me.” The song was written by Berry and Raynoma Mayberry Liles through their Rayber Music Writing Company. United Artists paid three thousand dollars for the national rights to the record and Rayber was permitted to keep local distribution rights, laying the foundation for what would soon become Motown Records.<sup>146</sup>

Berry Gordy, Jr., was above all else a businessman. His parents and siblings were all entrepreneurs. Mr. and Mrs. Gordy taught their children the value of self-reliance à la Booker T. Washington: hard work and a superior product equaled high profits. His decision to enter the music business was not a hasty one. His short-lived record store specializing in jazz helped him realize that music was changing. People in his part of town were not buying jazz in the early 1950s; they were looking for rhythm and blues, as was the trend in most cities with growing black populations.<sup>147</sup> While working on the

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<sup>145</sup> Aaron Sternfield, “The Real Thing: R.&B. Back; Rock & Roll Wilts, Says Veejay Boss,” *Billboard*, August 22, 1960, 6.

<sup>146</sup> Smith, 74-75.

<sup>147</sup> *Rock & Roll*, “Respect,” episode 4, directed by David Espar, (WGBH Boston and BBC, 1995).

Ford assembly line after his record shop went under, Gordy sang and hummed to pass the time and wondered what his next business opportunity might be. He saw a magazine ad that offered to write up song lyrics as sheet music for twenty-five dollars, and he submitted a song he wrote which was inspired by a Doris Day movie. It was an easy decision to make, he would later recall, since he had been boxing for a while and did not like the looks of the young fighters who were bruised and battered, in comparison with musicians who were in their fifties and looked half their age.<sup>148</sup>

Gordy's hometown, Detroit, Michigan, was just as segregated as Cleveland and also had a growing number of black southern migrants. Many of the area's blacks had come to Detroit seeking work in the automobile industry, hoping to leave behind the blatant and legal segregation and racial violence of the South. What they found was not much different from the southern Jim Crow culture. Though Gordy avoided political statements in Motown's music throughout most of the turbulent 1960s, just being a black man in Detroit and starting his own label which exclusively recorded and promoted black artists was a revolutionary act. The significance of Motown as a company cannot be overlooked in the history of the civil rights movement and the advancement of black cultural pride and consciousness. In Detroit, Gordy fostered the creation of "an independent black commercial culture," which in turn "participated in the larger struggle for racial equality," according to historian Suzanne E. Smith.<sup>149</sup> There is no way to separate the success and value of the Motown moment from the larger struggle for racial equality.

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<sup>148</sup>Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 17-18.

<sup>149</sup> Smith, 9.

According to Smokey Robinson, one of Motown's most successful artists, Gordy's goal with Motown was to make crossover music, meaning that whites would buy the records. He wanted "to make music with a funky beat and great stories that would be crossover, that would not be blues," Robinson says. "And that's what we did."<sup>150</sup> Gordy understood that rock and roll had black and white roots—rhythm and blues and country and western—and that the old distinctions of "black music" (rhythm and blues) and "white music" (country and western) no longer applied. To him, if it sold a million copies it was popular music, and that's what he wanted to make.<sup>151</sup> Two weeks after moving into the Hitsville, U.S.A. building, the new company produced a catchy song with a prophetic name to match Gordy's philosophy: "Money (That's What I Want)."

Gordy's new record label was busy building its vertical business model. Gordy hand-picked his artists and musicians, used the same house band—the Funk Brothers, whose members were all black except guitar player Joe Messina—and insisted on etiquette, singing, and dancing lessons for all of his stars. He wanted to guarantee that Motown showcased the best of black culture; men should not be too threatening, women not too aggressive. This was not only for the benefit of white audiences, but was meant to stir among black fans as well a sense of pride in the artistic achievements of these performers.<sup>152</sup>

Motown's first milestone came in 1961 when The Marvelettes' "Please Mr. Postman" hit number one on both the pop and rhythm and blues charts. This would not happen again for a Motown recording until Stevie Wonder's innovative "Fingertips, Part 2"

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<sup>150</sup> Friedlander, 170.

<sup>151</sup> James Miller, *Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1977* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 163.

<sup>152</sup> Smith, 121.



dominated the charts in the summer of 1963. Such widespread success of Motown artists contributed to *Billboard* magazine eliminating the rhythm and blues category in November of that year in favor of charting all music under the pop classification. Doing so bypassed any racial references and strengthened Motown's crossover achievements. *Billboard* had been pushed by Motown's success to desegregate pop music.<sup>153</sup>

### ***Musical Melting Pot***

Detroit's proximity to Cleveland meant that Motown artists made frequent trips to clubs like the integrated Leo's Casino on Euclid Avenue. Gordy once told author Mike Olszewski that he brought his acts to Cleveland to see if they were ready to go national; if not, they headed back to the Motor City to keep rehearsing.<sup>154</sup> "If you can make it in Cleveland, you can make it anywhere. Cleveland is a hard city," says George Hendricks, a performer whose band was once taken by WJMO deejay Ken Hawkins to audition for Motown. They were told, "We already have a Temptations."<sup>155</sup>

As one of Cleveland's only integrated nightclubs and an all-ages club, Leo's was an important center of music and an example of interracial cooperation. Motown played a significant role in increasing the club's stature in Northeast Ohio and on the national club circuit, as most of Motown's major acts performed at the club in the 1960s. Leo's opened in 1952 as a jazz and rhythm and blues club on East 49<sup>th</sup> Street and Central Avenue, but when the original location burned down in 1962 owner Leo Frank and new partner Jules Berger reopened at East 75<sup>th</sup> Street and Euclid Avenue. Motown and rhythm and blues artists were featured regularly, as well as comedians like Richard Pryor,

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<sup>153</sup> Hot 100, *Billboard*, November 30, 1963, 26; Smith., 88.

<sup>154</sup> Mike Olszewski, interview by author, Cleveland, Ohio, October 29, 2009.

<sup>155</sup> Hendricks, interview.

Redd Foxx, and Flip Wilson. “Leo’s was a true melting pot of entertainment for the community at large,” recalls Walter Williams of the Canton-based group the O’Jays. “It was about the classiest place you could play in Cleveland at that time.”<sup>156</sup> Though audiences at Leo’s were integrated, they did not feature white artists on their stage, for reasons that may have included financing or audience preference.<sup>157</sup> Still, it was a popular spot for music fans regardless of race or economic status.

Hendricks remembers that Leo’s Casino was packed with black and white music fans during the riots of the late 1960s. “Leo’s seemed to be one of the places where color didn’t matter back then during the shows,” Hendricks recalls. “Should have had a lot more Leo’s. That was one of the best places you could go.” Hendricks and Lou Ragland made music together in the 1960s, playing various nightclubs including the Can Can on West 25<sup>th</sup> Street on Cleveland’s West Side. They were generally treated well but club management did not allow them to mingle with the females in the audience so they were instructed to stay in their dressing room until they went onstage. Hendricks says that audiences were enthusiastic and younger white men related to the band; older white men were complimentary but did not want them talking to their wives and girlfriends. Still,

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<sup>156</sup> Deanna R. Adams, *Rock ‘n’ Roll and the Cleveland Connection* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2002), 73-75.

<sup>157</sup> In their March 30, 1968 edition, *Billboard* published a story in which it is noted that Leo’s Casino, “the city’s top Negro club,” had never featured a white performer. The Letterman, a popular white singing trio, were offered a date at the club. Tony Butala, one of The Letterman, explained in an email to the author that the offer was a mistake, as the club owners believed his group to be another group with the same name; this other group was all-black and had regional hit in 1961. Butala says that The Letterman were receiving much larger fees to perform than Leo’s, which he calls “just a glorified ‘lounge’,” could afford, so, even if the offer had been made to the correct Lettermen, they could not have accepted. He does acknowledge that The Lettermen’s then-manager likely would have considered lowering their price if he had known it would have helped break racial barriers. “Lettermen’s Single Sparks Offers for Nightery Dates,” *Billboard*, March 30, 1968, 30; Tony Butala, email to author, April 1, 2010; Tony Butala, email to author, April 2, 2010.

Hendricks believes that, “As far as entertaining, music kind of breaks through the color barrier.”<sup>158</sup>

Native Clevelander Jamilah Zand’s mother loved music and, when the money and circumstances were right she took her young daughter to Leo’s Casino to see Smokey Robinson or The Temptations. “Everything was music. The Temptations were like the soundtrack of my life,” Zand says. “Each time we went to Leo’s, it was just a thrill,” she recalls, adding that drinking ginger ale with a straw and a cherry in the glass was a highlight. Zand was a latch-key kid before the term was popular, and she moved from school to school as her mother sought work in various Cleveland neighborhoods. Music was one of the few constants in her young life. Each of the schools she attended was segregated until she reached high school, so her interaction with white people was virtually nonexistent—except at Leo’s. “It was like walking into a different world,” she remembers. “I was deeply entrenched in what it was like to be black and growing up black here in America...So, it was different when you go out and you see people that you actually see on TV sitting in the [Leo’s] audience.”<sup>159</sup>

Like Zand’s mother many parents of both races enjoyed a variety of music, even rock and roll. Joan Orosz’s parents never had objections to the music, and her mother was especially fond of Motown. “Everybody listened to [Motown],” she says, explaining its appeal to audiences of all generations and races. “It was not wild and crazy, it was not slow and gooky. It was just there. And it had a good beat and a good rhythm and you could dance to it easy, and you could hear the words and know what the song said...you could sing along with them and dance to them real easy.” As open-minded as her parents

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<sup>158</sup> Hendricks, interview.

<sup>159</sup> Jamilah Zand, interview by author, Cleveland, Ohio, October 30, 2009.

may have been about rock and roll, they had reservations about race even though Joan's best friend in high school was a black girl. "They didn't want to live by them," she explains, "but they didn't care if I was friends with one in school."<sup>160</sup>

Many other white parents felt the same way, and more than a few teenagers in Cleveland also held such views. Nevertheless, Motown's slogan, "the Sound of Young America," applied to black music that was purchased and enjoyed by white and black kids. Record Rendezvous, the store founded by Leo Mintz on Prospect Avenue in Cleveland, continued to be a popular stop for those looking for rhythm and blues and rock and roll records a decade after the first Moondog Coronation Ball. George Hendricks and Lou Ragland remember shopping at "The Vous," as it was referred to, though trading records with friends and neighbors was common for poor black kids. Ragland also recalls listening to records at after-hours parties or "speakeasies" at private homes that featured jukeboxes, card games, and drinking.<sup>161</sup>

Most black Clevelanders bought records at independent shops located in their neighborhoods. The Dean's House of Jazz was a popular chain of black-owned record stores on the East Side of town. Charm Warren-Celestine, whose parents owned the business, worked at their first location which opened on Addison Road and Wade Park in 1960 when she was ten years old. The majority of their customers were neighborhood residents, though they did attract people from other areas because of their reputation for having knowledgeable employees and the latest hits. Warren-Celestine became quite a musical authority at a young age. "You had to really be up on your music," she says. She listened to a lot of radio at home and explored the records in the store, so when

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<sup>160</sup> Joan Orosz, interview.

<sup>161</sup> Ragland, interview.

someone would come in and sing a few lyrics to a song they did not know the name of, she could instantly identify it for them. The store's music followed a daily format to suit the customer base and pace of the particular time of day: 8:30 AM to 10 AM was gospel; 10 AM to 7 PM was rhythm and blues and popular music; and 7 PM to 10 PM was for jazz. Her parents listened primarily to jazz, which she was not interested in at that age. "When you're a kid...you like nothing that your parents like," she explains. "Not because it's not good, [but because] you have to be obstinate." Her parents did not object to rock and roll, however, though they did not appreciate many black comedians like Moms Mabley and Dolemite who used adult humor.<sup>162</sup>

Warren-Celestine explains that young customers bought whatever they heard on the radio, from Motown to The Beatles. "For us, The Beatles was just as much of a phenomenon as [for] the suburban kids, because we heard The Beatles for a while," she says.<sup>163</sup> Little has been written about the fact that The Beatles' first American records were released by the Chicago-based and black-owned Vee-Jay Records, known for its rhythm and blues recordings. Another white group, The Four Seasons, also released records through Vee-Jay, such as their 1962 hit "Sherry."<sup>164</sup> "Beatlemania" had overtaken England in 1963, and The Beatles' stock was rising across the pond in the weeks following President John F. Kennedy's assassination. Vee-Jay released the *Introducing The Beatles* LP in July 1963, and their single "She Loves You" came out in September. Media coverage of British Beatlemania reached the United States, and in December it was announced that The Beatles would fly to New York in February to

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<sup>162</sup> Charm Warren-Celestine, interview by author, Cleveland, Ohio, October 12, 2009.

<sup>163</sup> Warren-Celestine, interview.

<sup>164</sup> Jerry Butler with Earl Smith, *Only the Strong Survive: Memoirs of a Soul Survivor* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 111.

appear on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, the highest-rated variety show of its time. Their newest single, "I Wanna Hold Your Hand," entered the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart on January 18, 1964 and quickly shot to number one on the *Cash Box* singles chart.<sup>165</sup> Once The Beatles and other British Invasion groups had firmly cemented their fan base in the United States, singer Lou Ragland says, "chocolate" audiences in nightclubs were more open to listening to songs by white artists. Prior to The Beatles black nightclub attendees wanted to hear the blues and rhythm and blues only.<sup>166</sup> The Beatles' sound was influenced by Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, and Buddy Holly, among others; during their September 1964 stop in Cleveland drummer Ringo Starr told the *Call and Post*, "We buy mostly [American] Negro records." Starr also acknowledged that The Beatles were not as popular with black youth in the United States as they were with black kids in England.<sup>167</sup> It may have appeared that way because black American youth were often unable to attend Beatles concerts for financial reasons, or because the band appeared in cities that were heavily segregated. Like Elvis before them, The Beatles could reach across racial lines through their music that came from black roots.

The Beatles gave younger kids like Mike Olszewski, who was eleven years old at the time of the British Invasion, a reason to save up their paper route and babysitting money.<sup>168</sup> Older teens who came of age musically with the Elvis phenomenon were also excited to have another reason to spend the day at the record store. Sheila Blecman bought all of her records at Kamms Record Shop in downtown Elyria, a mom and pop

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<sup>165</sup> Barry Miles, *The Beatles: A Diary, An intimate day by day history* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1998), 76, 82, 101; Chris Hutchins, "Dealer Unity Makes Strength," *Billboard*, December 14, 1963, 32; Eliot Tiegel, "British Beatles Hottest Capitol Singles Ever," *Billboard*, January 18, 1964, 1; Mark Lewinsohn, *The Complete Beatles Chronicle* (New York: Harmony Books, 1992), 136.

<sup>166</sup> Ragland, interview.

<sup>167</sup> "Ringo Tells Ken That Negro Artists 'Send' Him," *Call and Post*, September 18, 1964.

<sup>168</sup> Olszewski, interview.

shop where one could find fifteen copies of The Beatles' Vee-Jay single "Please Please Me" in 1962.<sup>169</sup> Joan Orosz shopped at deejay Tommy Edwards' popular Hillbilly Heaven, later renamed Record Heaven.<sup>170</sup> Other white teens frequented the May Company, Spartans, Uncle Bill's, and Giant Tiger to buy the latest hits. Olszewski says he and his friends had no particular loyalty to any record shop or department stores, as they simply bought records wherever they were cheapest.<sup>171</sup> This is in stark contrast to the record-buying habits of black youth, who remained loyal to local record shops in large part because of their proximity to home; many had little or no access to downtown or suburban shopping. Though rhythm and blues and rock and roll recordings were sold at the larger chain stores, independent shops often featured a better variety and employees had a more intimate knowledge of the music, like Charm Warren-Celestine and her parents at The Dean's House of Jazz.

### ***Radio Free Cleveland***

Though many teenagers of all races may have been unable to buy large quantities of records, everyone could listen to the radio to hear the latest hits. Radio was a democratizing element for both music and race relations, as one could listen to any station no matter where they lived—and it was free. *Billboard*, the nation's most widely circulated music trade magazine, surveyed 179 station managers about the issue of programming in 1956, and seventy-nine reported that they had altered their programming to reflect the public's craving for rock and roll. Some station owners, however, did not

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<sup>169</sup> Blecman, interview; "Don't Pass Me By," Staxawax blog, entry posted June 17, 2009, <http://staxawax.com/> (accessed March 13, 2010).

<sup>170</sup> Joan Orosz, interview; Adams, 226.

<sup>171</sup> Olszewski, interview.

wish to change with the times; in the words of one anti-rock owner, “We do not consider rock and roll music.” Still, radio stations paid attention to the prime listening hours among teenagers, which was in the afternoons when the kids returned home after school.<sup>172</sup>

Greater Cleveland teenagers spent their afternoons and evenings listening to WHK and WERE for their favorite rock and roll hits, and by the end of the 1950s WJMO and WABQ had reformatted to all-black music. Sheila Blecman vividly remembers when she got her own bedroom and was able to listen to the radio all night. Disk jockey Mad Daddy Pete Myers of WHK was a teen favorite and the first “character” Blecman heard on the radio.<sup>173</sup> Lou Ragland also listened to WHK, as well as WJMO and WABQ, but he remembers hearing WLAC out of Nashville coming in loud and clear over the Cleveland airwaves as well. WLAC’s white disk jockeys, such as “Daddy” Gene Nobles and “John R” Richbourg, had been playing “race music” for years, and Ragland distinctly recalls a favorite rhythm and blues program sponsored by Randy’s Record Shop that influenced his love of the music.<sup>174</sup>

WJMO and WABQ were later recognized as urban stations with wildly popular disk jockeys like Ken Hawkins, “Jockey John” Slade, Mike Payne, Eddie Edwards, and Lynn Tolliver. Though whites listened to these stations as well, they really were geared toward the black community in both programming and vernacular. WABQ, for example, stood for “We Are Better Qualified,” as in, We Are Better Qualified to Give Our People What They Want. Jamilah Zand listened to WJMO, “the Mighty Mo,” each morning while she got ready for school. She fondly remembers hearing the deejay repeat the phrase “I’m a

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<sup>172</sup> Gary Kramer, “R.&R. a Teen-Age Must,” *Billboard*, November 10, 1956, 21, 62.

<sup>173</sup> Blecman, interview.

<sup>174</sup> Ragland, interview.



little piece of leather but I'm well put together," something she understood and related to.<sup>175</sup> Warren-Celestine had a similar experience listening to WJMO. "...[B]y the time I was nine or ten I knew WJMO...as the radio station that I could relate to" because of black disk jockeys like "Jockey John" Slade and Jack Gibson. "...I realized that I was listening to an urban station or a black station because of the kind of music I was being fed," she explains.<sup>176</sup> It is difficult to imagine white teens listening to WHK or WIXY getting a similar feeling of community from disk jockeys or programming, other than knowing that most young people listened to the same music they enjoyed.

Radio personalities were as powerful in the early 1960s as they had been in the beginning of rock and roll's popularity, and they still brought out the crowds to any event they hosted. Ken Hawkins' Spring All-Star Show at the Cleveland Arena in 1963 was interrupted by fighting between several attendees. Police were called to break up a "riot" at the show, but only six people out of seven thousand concert-goers were removed from the venue, and three additional patrons were taken to St. Vincent Charity Hospital and treated for injuries.<sup>177</sup> This disturbance came eleven years after the actual riot at the Moondog Coronation Ball at the Arena, and surely must have brought back memories of the power and potential danger of the music.

The influence of deejays was strong in other major radio markets like Philadelphia, where jockey Georgie Woods of black music station WDAS had a large white following. Woods was a board member of the local NAACP chapter and often spoke about racial issues on his program. In the summer of 1963, a group of white teenagers arrived to

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<sup>175</sup> Zand, interview.

<sup>176</sup> Warren-Celestine, interview.

<sup>177</sup> "Rock 'n' Roll 'Riot' Alarm Brings Police," *Plain Dealer*, May 12, 1963; "Rock 'n Rollers Almost Riot," *Call and Post*, May 18, 1963.

participate in an event organized by the NAACP to promote school integration in a black neighborhood. Woods was impressed, but also believed that his stand on integration had likely cost him white listeners. He was unconcerned about this, as he said that white listeners were “a bonus audience” for him and the station. “The Negro audience is still there and these are the people who buy the products we sell,” he told *Billboard* in 1963. “All I can sell my white audience are records.”<sup>178</sup>

Some Cleveland jockeys had similar influence over their young listeners. WJMO’s “Jockey John” Slade, a lifetime member of the NAACP, worked closely with Glenville High School students and the Glenville YMCA on weekly Wednesday night activities. The *Call and Post* noted in 1960 that “It has long been known that announcements of a religious, civic or cultural nature made over the airways by John Slade have resulted in the success of the venture.” The station also had a traveling road show called the “Mighty Mo Mobile Show,” a talent show that visited hospitals and churches, and which once held a benefit for the NAACP. In addition, WJMO conducted a “radiothon” for the March of Dimes and helped raise funds for the Parents Volunteer Association for Retarded Children. “Jockey John” and Eddie O’Jay of WABQ participated in an event for the Junior Women’s Civic League’s Health and Welfare Fund in 1960. That same year the *Call and Post* bestowed upon WJMO an “A” rating for community service in light of their efforts to use the airwaves to promote positive involvement in the area.<sup>179</sup>

Though WABQ and WJMO were considered “black stations” because their on-air personalities were black, they played a mix of music. The white-owned WABQ altered

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<sup>178</sup> “Focus on the Deejay: Philly’s Georgie Leans On Racial Agreement,” *Billboard*, November 30, 1963, 37.

<sup>179</sup> Anita Polk, “WJMO Rates ‘A’ For Community Service,” *Call and Post*, November 12, 1960; “Saturday to Mark 2<sup>nd</sup> J.W.C.L. Charity Ball,” *Call and Post*, November 26, 1960.

its format in 1962 to reflect the growing diversity of its audience, a trend acknowledged by program director Jack Gibson. Their “daily diet” of gospel and blues music was now reserved for Sundays only, though the daytime station would now sign on each morning with a prayer. WABQ’s news, editorials, and talk shows would now be complemented by national Top 50 recordings, everything from Bobby Blue Bland to Neil Sedaka, explained Gibson in a letter to the editor of the *Call and Post* written shortly after the change. He went on to say that the white station managers “gave the nod to Negro program directors because they recognize the fact that Negro radio has to grow up with its audience,” something many others in the music industry were beginning to realize as well.<sup>180</sup>

WHK reached out to young people not only with music, as Linda Shisila recalls, but with Bob Friend’s “Homework Help” program, where kids could call the station to ask for assistance with whatever homework problems they were having.<sup>181</sup> Joe Mayer hosted “Mayer in the Morning” on WHK, and Lynn Tolliver remembers hearing black and white artists on Mayer’s show.<sup>182</sup> WIXY, founded in 1965, also played a mix of artists, and was popular with kids and adults alike, as was the Top 40 station KYW. The continued popularity of rock and roll and its evolution through Motown and other styles downplayed the importance of race for music fans and professionals. “Nobody listens to an artist because he’s Negro anymore,” Gibson said in 1963, “people tune in for entertainment, information and record hits regardless of the artist’s or deejay’s race.”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> “WABQ Changes Sound To ‘Powerful’ Chant,” *Call and Post*, November 17, 1962; Jack Gibson, letter to the editor, *Call and Post*, January 5, 1963; Vox Jox, *Billboard*, December 8, 1962, 42.

<sup>181</sup> Linda Shisila, interview by author, Parma, Ohio, January 12, 2010.

<sup>182</sup> Tolliver, interview.

<sup>183</sup> “Cleveland’s WABQ Changes Format, Ups Rating,” *Jet*, January 19, 1963, 58.

Others in the music industry had the same attitude about music and race. Stax Records, based in Memphis and founded around the same time as Motown, was making a name for itself with artists like Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, and Booker T. and the MGs. There was some rivalry between the two studios, and some public teasing: the marquee on Stax's building had giant red letters that spelled out SOULSVILLE, U.S.A., a play on the name of Motown's HITSVILLE, U.S.A. studios. The differences between Stax and the more famous Motown were obvious. Stax was founded by Jim Stewart and his sister Estelle Axton, who were white, and many of their bands, like Booker T. and the MGs, featured black and white musicians. This was not a political move, nor was it an attempt to create a particular sound by bringing black and white musical styles together. "It was just the people involved...it was a natural form of musical expression," said Stewart. "It just happened."<sup>184</sup> The band also did not approach life or music with cultural change in mind. Booker T. Jones says that he and his bandmates played in white and black clubs, ate in white and black restaurants, and stayed in white and black hotels. "We just looked away from the fact that it had never been done before," he recalls, "and we just did it."<sup>185</sup>

Performers and fans were increasingly on the same page when it came to racial attitudes, especially when it meant looking past race in music. Though black artists were among the most popular in American culture—and they, indeed, *created* modern American culture—the industry itself was not as color blind as it may have appeared. American youth were also not always willing to put racial problems behind them, even if

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<sup>184</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1999), 97, 112.

<sup>185</sup> *Rock & Roll*, "Respect."

they did join young people of different backgrounds while snapping their fingers to the latest hit songs.

## CHAPTER IV

### DANCING IN THE STREET

In 1960, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) stated that America's "most pressing unfinished business" was the eradication of racial discrimination, and though the progress since *Brown* had been limited things "are a lot better off than they were in 1954." ACLU executive director Patrick Murphy Malin attributed the modest gains to changes in southern attitudes toward public school desegregation, though he believed that "in many 'northern' locations the problem grows faster than the solution, and it is almost universally true that much remains to be done. 'The North' can justifiably claim it has shouldered its own share of a national and international obligation."<sup>186</sup> Northern cities continued to absorb large numbers of black southerners as the 1960s began. Cleveland's overall population since 1950 decreased by 4.2 percent, while the number of its black residents increased by 71.5 percent to nearly 251,000 people, or 28.89 percent of all

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<sup>186</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1960, Volume 1, Characteristics of the Population, Part 37, Ohio*, Tables 5, 25 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961); Peter J. Leahy and Nancy Grant, *Racial Residential Segregation in Ohio's Eight Largest Cities: 1950-1980*, Tables 2, 3 (Ohio Academy of Science: Columbus, 1985) [https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/1811/23045/1/V085N1\\_002.pdf](https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/1811/23045/1/V085N1_002.pdf) (accessed January 24, 2010); "ACLU Reports: Racial Discrimination Remains U.S. Top Problem," *Call and Post*, January 2, 1960.

Clevelanders. Racially motivated violence was common in neighborhoods that were previously all-white, as black residents took bold steps to integrate such areas.

In the South, black high school and college students began a series of peaceful lunch counter sit-ins of stores which served black customers except when it came to allowing them to sit down at food counters. There had been twenty similar protests in the late 1950s, but the February 1960 Greensboro, North Carolina sit-in at Woolworth's department store organized by four black freshmen from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical College inspired demonstrations in other cities around the state. In Nashville, Tennessee, another group of student activists created the Nashville Student Movement to put into action similar tactics they had been practicing in workshops. Such student activism upset many of the civil rights movement's elders, who felt that their efforts to enact civil rights legislation were overshadowed by the new youth element that preferred direct action. Still, NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins praised young people during an April 1960 speech in Cleveland, declaring that "Negro youth is finished with racial segregation, not only as a philosophy but as a practice." The *Call and Post* praised the "growing resentment on the part of young Negroes against the vicious forms of racial segregation to which they are subjected," and announced that "The governments of the world are being changed by student activism." The editorial's last sentence indicates a lingering and ironic resentment against the music young people loved, perhaps unaware of the influence it had on the racial consciousness of young people of all races: "There is hope that here in America, both Negro and white, will forego rock and roll long enough to make a lasting contribution to justice and brotherhood in the United States."<sup>187</sup> Rock

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<sup>187</sup> Williams, 126-127, 136; Dierenfield, 52-53; "Negro Students Challenge Jim-Crow," *Call and Post*, March 5, 1960.

and roll had for years served as a subtle and unofficial venue through which young Americans could explore the idea of equality for all. Instead of diverting the attention of teenagers away from social issues, as this editorial suggests, rock and roll had already been established as one of the most important ways through which they would understand and express their feelings about injustice.

Folk musicians had long been using their songs to critique American society, but popular music performers were slow to join them. Sam Cooke's 1964 "A Change is Gonna Come" is one of the early pop songs sung by a black performer directly speaking to social problems and the civil rights movement, though some, especially white listeners, may not have interpreted it that way.

...I go to the movie and I go downtown  
Somebody keep tellin' me  
don't hang around...

Then I go to my brother  
and I say brother help me please  
But he wind up knocking me  
back down on my knees

There have been times that I thought  
I couldn't last for long  
But now I think I'm able to carry on

It's been a long time, but I know  
A change is gonna come, yes it will<sup>188</sup>

The lyrics clearly comment on the issue of segregation. *Time* magazine declared in the summer of 1964 that "Today the kids seem to want to listen to a message with their music." The happy-go-lucky songs of the 1950s had given way to lyrics which had "lately acquired an engaging relevance to life that is found nowhere else in pop music."

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<sup>188</sup> Songs of Sam Cooke, "Songs: 'A Change is Gonna Come'," Songs of Sam Cooke, [http://www.sonsofsamcooke.com/songs/a\\_change\\_is\\_gonna\\_come.htm](http://www.sonsofsamcooke.com/songs/a_change_is_gonna_come.htm) (accessed March 20, 2010).



The article spoke to the then-current trend of hot rod and surfing music, whose audience lived “somewhere between Malibu Beach and Despairsville.” Such songs dealt with issues deeper than typical teenager concerns, though they were often found in the subtext.<sup>189</sup> Though these styles were considered regional even after becoming popular nationwide, their sometimes dark lyrical content was a sign that young people were taking life and death—and music—more seriously than in the past.

Berry Gordy was hesitant to permit Motown artists to include social commentary in their lyrics, though some, like Marvin Gaye, could barely contain their frustration when hearing news reports about racial injustice and riots. The Supremes, Motown’s most successful act, and other black stars continued to sell millions of albums and chart in the Top 40. In 1964, forty-two of the best selling rock and roll records came from Motown.<sup>190</sup> But *Billboard*’s integration of the rhythm and blues and pop categories into one popular music category that had been in place since late 1963 changed back on January 30, 1965. Music had begun to diversify once again and the magazine felt that a singular pop category simply could not encompass all musical styles. The crossover success of Motown was a major step forward for black performers and their white fans, though it was clearly not enough to keep the racial politics of the day out of the music industry. Despite the resegregation of the music charts, Motown reached number one in both categories with The Temptations’ “My Girl.” The continued chart dominance of Motown aside, things were changing, both in society and in music.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> “Rock ‘n’ Roll: Some Place near Despairsville,” *Time*, June 5, 1964, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,938616,00.html> (accessed January 12, 2010).

<sup>190</sup> “Rock ‘n’ Roll: The Sound of the Sixties,” *Time*, May 21, 1965, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,901728,00.html> (accessed January 12, 2010).

<sup>191</sup> Smith, 154.

## *Heat Wave*

In the first years of Motown's success racial strife consumed Cleveland. The housing crisis inspired the creation of low-rent units in previously all-white neighborhoods. The West Side of Cleveland had traditionally been one of those areas. "It was unheard of for a black family to live on the West Side," says John Wilson. "The Cuyahoga River separated all of that. I didn't even know what it [was] to go to the West Side except passing through on [Interstate] 71 going to Columbus, not even until I was grown."<sup>192</sup> Jean Cotton understood segregation as soon as she moved back to Cleveland from integrated Ravenna in 1961. "You just knew where to go and where not to go," like Murray Hill, Parma, and Lakewood. "And if you went you were in before dark," she remembers.<sup>193</sup> The Cleveland City Council voted in April 1961 to rezone a section of the West 25<sup>th</sup> Street area for federal housing, a measure opposed by hundreds of white West Siders attending the meeting where the proposal was passed. Opponents were led by Norbert G. Dennerll, Jr., who was open about the fear that public housing would mean an "invasion" of black residents. The *Call and Post* praised the project while pointing out that there was really not a true shortage of housing for the growing black population of the city; rather, there were numerous empty homes on the West Side that were advertised as being for rent, but only a few were available to black renters. Public housing projects, on the other hand, were available to anyone regardless of race.<sup>194</sup>

The Housing Committee of the Cleveland Branch NAACP submitted its own study on the housing situation to the Ohio State Civil Rights Commission in the early 1960s,

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<sup>192</sup> Wilson, interview.

<sup>193</sup> Jean Cotton, interview by author, Cleveland, Ohio, December 3, 2009.

<sup>194</sup> "Bigots Lose West Side Housing Fight," *Call and Post*, April 22, 1961; "A Victory for Decency," *Call and Post*, April 22, 1961.

detailing examples of discrimination against and harassment of black residents. The authors declared that “Cleveland has the most rigid housing pattern of any northern community of comparable size,” and charged real estate brokers, title insurance agencies, and mortgage companies with creating the sort of “heightened racial tensions” and “panic evacuation” that led James Orosz’s family to move out of the Lee-Harvard area years earlier. When black families started moving closer to the all-white area, Orosz remembers, “for sale” signs cropped up on every white family’s house. He and his friends collected the signs because they did not want their parents to move for fear of breaking up their friendships. “So our thought was, get rid of all of these signs,” he says. “But that didn’t work.” The neighborhood was eventually integrated, and Orosz’s family was one of the last to leave.<sup>195</sup> Orosz understood that his parents’ reasons for wanting to leave the neighborhood were racially motivated. The actions of Orosz and his friends were based on their desire to maintain their circle of friends, however, and not on any ideas about living in an integrated neighborhood.

In May 1958, William Tipton and his wife moved to Indian Mound Road in Valleyview. White residents publicly objected at a community meeting, and the Tiptons’ water supply was soon polluted and a stench bomb thrown into their house. Booker Busby was the first black resident on his block of East 114<sup>th</sup> Street in June 1959; he was welcomed with a burning cross on his lawn. Willie Richardson’s windows were broken by rocks and profane language was written on his Christine Avenue home in April 1961; he was the first non-white to move into the neighborhood. The stories reported in the

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<sup>195</sup> James Orosz, interview by author, Solon, Ohio, November 8, 2009.

NAACP study represent only a small fraction of the racial incidents involving housing integration occurring in Cleveland in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>196</sup>

Discrimination and threats also were directed at interracial churches like the House of Prayer in Christ Church in the Hough neighborhood. Pastor Ernest Harbarger was the victim of threats to his life and vandalism was directed at the church's new building on Kosciuszko Avenue in 1961. He said that white residents were the perpetrators because "they do not want Negroes" in the area. Police responded to Harbarger's call when he reported receiving threats over the telephone, but they merely looked at the broken windows on the church building and made a comment about the neighborhood being Catholic.<sup>197</sup> Such indifference from Cleveland police officers was hardly a surprise, as the U.S. Civil Rights Commission declared that same year that Cleveland is a city with a "pattern of police brutality," placing it in the company of Newton, Georgia and behind Atlanta and Little Rock in terms of providing "enlightened leadership" to prevent police violence.<sup>198</sup>

One positive note, though one that affected few black Greater Clevelanders, was the Ravenna Town and Country Club's decision to actively recruit one hundred black couples for membership in their exclusive club. Special events were planned for adults and children, including a December Rock 'n Roll Night for teenagers.<sup>199</sup> Such special consideration for teenagers was, in part, a way to recruit families to the club. But it also shows that young people were an important part of society by 1961, and using rock and

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<sup>196</sup> Paper submitted to the Ohio State Civil Rights Commission by Cleveland Branch NAACP, Harold B. Williams, ED, and James B. Taylor, Chairman of Cleveland Branch NAACP Housing Committee, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records, Cleveland, Ohio, 1924-1969, Container 54, MS 3520, Folder 2, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland.

<sup>197</sup> "No Negroes Wanted Say Hough Residents," *Call and Post*, November 4, 1961.

<sup>198</sup> "Rights Commission Rips Cleveland's Police Brutality," *Call and Post*, November 25, 1961.

<sup>199</sup> "Ravenna Town and Country Club Invites Negro Members," *Call and Post*, October 7, 1961.

roll to attract them was a sensible tactic. This promotion also indicates the change in attitudes toward rock and roll among the black middle class. Motown's influence on attitudes at this point was growing, as the label had produced two number one songs on *Billboard's* popular music chart and several on the rhythm and blues chart by this time, as well as countless other songs that were getting heavy radio play.

But Motown was not the only thing that may have influenced black—and white—middle class attitudes about rock and roll. Chubby Checker's "The Twist" was one of the most popular songs of 1961. "The Twist" was originally released in 1959 and became a popular dance in the summer of 1960 among black and white Americans of all ages. Checker became a sought-after performer and had additional hits over the next few years. In January 1962, "The Twist" became the only song to ever go to number one for a non-consecutive second time. Checker, a young black performer, was only nineteen years old when his song sold over one million copies.<sup>200</sup>

Despite the omnipresence of "The Twist" in the first few years of the 1960s, some were not happy about the dance itself. Several Cleveland-area schools banned the Twist, including Euclid High School and John Marshall High School. Lakewood High School banned the Twist in 1960, though the city's two junior high schools had no rule against it. Principal Mahlon A. Povenmire explained in 1963 that, though the dance is not inherently "improper," it "CAN be danced in an improper manner." Perhaps taking a cue from civil rights activists, four hundred students gathered in the Lakewood High School parking lot one night that September to protest the Twist ban by holding a "boycott

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<sup>200</sup> Chubby Checker, "Biography," The Official Chubby Checker Website, <http://www.chubbychecker.com/bio.asp> (accessed April 21 2010); "Chubby Checker: Singer sparks 'Twist' craze," *Ebony*, January 1961, 41.

dance.” Police arrived on the scene quickly and the protest ended peaceably.<sup>201</sup> The city of Lakewood had fewer than thirty black residents when the ban was established, so the fear of race mixing brought on by the “improper” dancing of the Twist was likely not among the reasons for the ban.

Though the origins of the song and dance were disputed, its roots were indisputably black. A story in the *Call and Post* explains that “the Twist is ‘old hat’ with Negro dancers in America,” adding, “Now even the most conservative American dancer is twisting, and such renowned dance studios as Arthur Murray’s are teaching the Twist.” One critic of the dance explains that it was copied by humans from monkeys. “Monkeys and apes infested with fleas and ticks undergo the same contortions and movements,” said the unnamed commentator as quoted in the *Call and Post*. Such language is reminiscent of racist attacks on the early days of rock and roll, though it is not stated whether the critic is black or white. Aside from the expected opposition to all things rock and roll, the overwhelming success of the Twist dance, with its simple side to side movements that anyone could perform, marks an important milestone in the acceptance of black performers, their music, and their style of dance.<sup>202</sup>

### ***The Revolution Has Come to Town***

Though many adults were dancing the Twist along with their children, teenagers were increasingly independent and openly distancing themselves from their parents and the ideas and traditions of previous generations, particularly in regard to race. “Teens are

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<sup>201</sup> “Lakewood Dance Ban Is Not a New Twist,” *Plain Dealer*, September 29, 1963; “Noisy Twist-Ban Protest ‘Shuffled Off’ in Lakewood,” *Plain Dealer*, September 28, 1963.

<sup>202</sup> “Chubby Checker To Teach ‘The Twist’ To Britains,” *Call and Post*, December 9, 1961; Masco Young, They’re Talking About, *Call and Post*, February 17, 1962.

more informed and open-minded than before and we want to find out things,” Chicago high school student Marguerite Dawson told *Jet* in 1962. “We want to do things—for ourselves.” Patricia Lloyd, another high school student who served as president of the school social center committee and vice president of a human relations club, echoed the ACLU’s sentiments when she called human relations “the most crucial problem we face,” and believes that her generation of teenagers is “better prepared to handle human relations problems than our forefathers.” They understood that people cannot be forced to get along with others, but most believed that integration was possible. “All we can do is work with educated whites,” Dawson said. “I wish all people were blind. Then they wouldn’t know who they were talking to—an Irishman, and Italian, a Jew or a Negro. He would just be another person. This would cut out the whole problem.”<sup>203</sup>

Young people hoped to achieve equality through direct action, which included appealing to the conscience of Americans as well as stomping upon the standards of a community. They had to make discrimination and hatred a moral issue in order to be effective, no matter what their tactics. Collective action like bus boycotts in the 1950s proved to student activists that such public disruptions could force social change on a community otherwise unwilling to negotiate rationally. James Robinson, executive director of CORE, says that sit-ins gave members a sense of power, “because what we did was making a difference to society.”<sup>204</sup> The Freedom Riders had the same idea. Organized by CORE in the spring of 1961, the Freedom Rides were a direct challenge to segregation in the South, where, seven years after *Brown*, only 7.3 percent of black

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<sup>203</sup> “What Our Teen-Agers Want Most,” *Jet*, November 29, 1962, 46-48.

<sup>204</sup> Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 229.

school children attended integrated schools.<sup>205</sup> Small integrated groups boarded two buses in Washington, D.C., and attempted to ride to New Orleans. The plan, based on the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, was to simply ignore signs for segregated facilities like bathrooms and lunch counters, and to make sure that blacks rode in the fronts and whites in the backs of the buses. The Freedom Riders also committed to staying in jail if arrested in order to place a financial burden on the community in which they were harassed.<sup>206</sup>

The Freedom Riders got exactly the reaction they expected. John Lewis and Albert Bigelow were punched and kicked by hoodlums in a white waiting room in North Carolina. The activists were viciously attacked by a mob as they entered Alabama, some beaten within an inch of their life. President Kennedy was hesitant to intervene, lest he upset southern senators, and the Freedom Riders were determined to move on until they reached New Orleans. This was not to be, however, as they were arrested in Jackson, Mississippi, most for breach of peace, and put in jail. But they did achieve some of their goals. CORE co-founder James Farmer said the Freedom Rides were developed with the “specific intention of creating a crisis,” and though the Kennedy administration refused to protect the Riders until the last minute, it finally intervened. Indeed, they became, as Farmer said, a force that “created a situation that was headline news all over the world.”<sup>207</sup>

There were examples of challenges to authority and tradition in the North as well. A sorority at the aptly-named Defiance College in Defiance, Ohio, admitted two black girls in 1963, despite the national sorority’s unspoken policy against integration. Upon being

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<sup>205</sup> “Negroes Are Now In Integrated Schools In South,” *Call and Post*, December 23, 1961.

<sup>206</sup> Dierenfield, 62.

<sup>207</sup> Dierenfield, 62.



dropped by the sorority's headquarters the local chapter stayed together as an independent group. This is but one example of such rebellion among students at the time. The *Call and Post* ran an editorial about the incident, praising young people for their liberal attitudes. Bigotry was "being educated out of the younger generation," the newspaper happily noted, adding that "young people do not want to be saddled with the energy-wasting customs of their elders." This generation was willing to speak and act in accordance with their own beliefs, free from "the rock of prejudice hanging around their necks while they attempt to stay afloat in the sea of national and international problems."<sup>208</sup> Just how young people were being "educated out of" bigotry is not explained, other than the fact that these were college students in a liberal arts school which emphasized community involvement.<sup>209</sup> Though it is not known exactly what music they listened to, music may have, in part, inspired their inclusive attitude about race.

The popular Kresge's department store was the target of picketers protesting the store's discriminatory business practices. "Freedom Fighters" and NAACP members briefly marched in front of Kresge's downtown Cleveland location in September 1961 to change what they called Jim Crow practices like segregated washrooms and time clocks for employees, as well as their lack of black sales clerks. Management was willing to speak to picketers shortly after their protest began and arrangements were made to change the objectionable policies.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> "Future Hope Lies With Young," *Call and Post*, March 30, 1963.

<sup>209</sup> Ohio History Central, "Defiance College," Ohio Historical Society, <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=2115> (accessed April 28, 2010).

<sup>210</sup> "Pickets Complaints 'Cured' at Kresge's," *Call and Post*, September 16, 1961.

Civil rights activism, racial violence, and increasingly confrontational black leaders turned 1963 into the year of the “Negro revolt” for cities like Chicago, Birmingham, and Detroit. It was also a significant year in “this epochal era of Negro frustration” for Cleveland.<sup>211</sup> In June, white residents of the Sowinski Park area attacked innocent blacks after an incident involving the rape of a fifteen-year-old girl. Police stood watch as young whites threw rocks at cars with black drivers and passengers, and then pulled their guns and forced them out of their cars. Black and white rioters were later arrested, though white offenders incurred only minor fines and sentences.<sup>212</sup> That July, twenty-five thousand protestors, including black members of the United Freedom Movement, NAACP, CORE, and whites from various religious and civic groups marched through downtown Cleveland, singing and carrying signs with messages like “Segregated housing is unconstitutional,” “De facto schools must go,” and “No breakman needed on this freedom train.”<sup>213</sup>

The United Freedom Movement (UFM), a local coalition of social, civil rights, and other organizations, began picketing the Cleveland Board of Education in late September to meet their demands. A month of negotiations with the board fell apart because of the board’s stalling on the issue of ending de facto segregation and other related concerns. “The revolution has come to town,” announced Harold B. Williams, UFM coordinator and executive secretary of the Cleveland branch NAACP. “Let’s hit the street like one mighty wave!” he screamed to members of the UFM steering committee.<sup>214</sup> The

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<sup>211</sup> “Civil Rights: The Awful Roar,” *Time*, August 30, 1963, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,940696,00.html> (accessed January 12, 2010).

<sup>212</sup> “Say Cops Stand Idle As Mob Stones Negroes,” *Call and Post*, June 22, 1963.

<sup>213</sup> Charles Price, “As Thousands Brave Rain to Join Freedom March,” *Call and Post*, July 20, 1963.

<sup>214</sup> Don Robertson, “UFM Set to Picket Board of Education, 400 Roar Approval of Decision,” *Plain Dealer*, September 25, 1963.

picketing continued for nearly a week, finally ending after a two-and-a-half hour meeting with the Board of Education where a citizens' committee was decided upon to push "meaningful integration" of the Cleveland school system by September 1964.<sup>215</sup>

The popular Jazz Temple coffee shop and concert venue was bombed in August. Known for bringing top jazz acts like Miles Davis, Art Blakey, and Dinah Washington, the interracial club was frequented by students from all over Northeast Ohio, as well as older jazz aficionados and musicians from the Cleveland Orchestra. The Jazz Temple was located on Mayfield Road near Little Italy, and though this was the first such incident since opening two years earlier it followed a pattern of disturbances at black-owned businesses and residences in white neighborhoods, and was not the last occurrence of racial violence in the area.<sup>216</sup>

An interesting experiment in promoting interracial acceptance began in November. Interracial Home Visit Day, based on a similar exercise in Chicago earlier that year, was sponsored by an interfaith committee in order to launch a "journey to understanding" starting November 3<sup>rd</sup>. The Cleveland Community Relations Board was asked by Mayor Ralph S. Locher to coordinate the work of this group. The idea was for white families to visit black homes for coffee and conversation led by trained discussion leaders. Those wishing to participate signed up through their church or synagogue, or by filling out a form found in the *Plain Dealer*. The event was well-attended, with approximately four thousand participants who met in three hundred homes, and another home visit day was scheduled for February 1964, this time with black Greater Clevelanders visiting white homes. Though these events were an innovative way to bring people of different

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<sup>215</sup> Don Robertson, "Study Voted; Pickets to Be Removed," *Plain Dealer*, October 1, 1963.

<sup>216</sup> "Believe Racial Bigots Behind The Jazz Temple Bombing," *Call and Post*, August 17, 1963.

backgrounds together face to face, the *Call and Post*'s Bob Williams pointed out that it was likely that those whites who chose to take part "were obviously friendly towards Negroes."<sup>217</sup> Still, the event shows the willingness of many Clevelanders to reach out to those of different races and, one on one, to promote peace and diversity.

### ***Separate and Unequal***

Less than three weeks after Cleveland's first Interracial Home Visit Day, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Shortly before Kennedy's death, Roy Wilkins criticized his administration's hesitance to take bolder steps on civil rights issues, saying that, though the President and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy meant well, "they have underestimated the depth of feeling of Americans over this issue." Wilkins gave the Kennedys credit for risking more than previous administrations had, and acknowledged that they had probably lost some southern support because of the actions they had taken on behalf of civil rights.<sup>218</sup> With the President gone, many in the movement and in the general public wondered what would become of racial equality.

Young people were especially affected by President Kennedy and his family, who represented a healthy, youthful way of life and attitude that was refreshing after decades of older leaders who failed to inspire and relate the way Kennedy had. He was the perfect person to lead the United States in the early 1960s, and he fit in with the continuing teenage revolution that was still in full swing at the time of his assassination.

Alvin Silverman's editorial a week later focused on the loss young people felt.

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<sup>217</sup> "Anti-Bias Coffee Klatsch," *Ebony*, April 1963, 67-70; "Interracial Home Visits Set Nov. 3," *Plain Dealer*, September 27, 1963; Bob Williams, "Finds Hate Culprits Absent At Interracial Coffee Sips," *Call and Post*, November 9, 1963.

<sup>218</sup> Roy Wilkins, "Wilkins Attacks 'Politics-As-Usual' Civil Rights Approach by JFK," *Call and Post*, November 2, 1963.

“Everyone lost something in the assassination,” he writes, “but none as much as young America, to which the purposes of President Kennedy, his thoughts and aspirations, primarily were directed.” Silverman says that the President looked for young Americans to round out his circle of advisors and companions, and it was upon young America that he would rely for his reelection in 1964. President Kennedy felt that “there were not enough reactionaries or radicals or haters to resist this tide of youth.”<sup>219</sup> Sheila Blecman, like most young people at the time, vividly recalls the day he died, and the fear that many felt. “When he was assassinated, our security was gone,” she explains.<sup>220</sup> Even the youngest Americans were deeply aware of the loss of President Kennedy. Jamilah Zand remembers that rainy Cleveland day when classes were stopped and the entire school congregated in the gymnasium, unsure of what was happening. She was nine. “Even though, maybe I didn’t understand what assassination was,” she says, she was “overwhelmingly sad” about Kennedy’s death.<sup>221</sup> Frederick N. Brown told the *Plain Dealer* that his seven-year-old daughter had been watching television coverage of the assassination, and later made a remarkable comment that made him and his wife know that their little girl “understood part of the true meaning of President Kennedy’s life.” “There are so many problems. All we hear about is problems,” the girl told her family over dinner. “I wish they would make the Negroes the same as everybody else. At least that would be one less problem, wouldn’t it?”<sup>222</sup>

School desegregation was one major way civil rights activists believed equality could happen. Carlotta Walls, one of the Little Rock Nine, visited several Cleveland high

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<sup>219</sup> Alvin Silverman, “Nation’s Youth Has Big Voice,” *Plain Dealer*, December 1, 1963.

<sup>220</sup> Blecman, interview.

<sup>221</sup> Zand, interview.

<sup>222</sup> Frederick N. Brown, letter to the editor, *Plain Dealer*, December 1, 1963.

schools in 1959 and declared that they were in a “very sad predicament.” She found that Glenville High School and East High School, among other black schools, lagged behind Little Rock’s now-integrated Central High in terms of college preparatory courses in math and the sciences. Students in Cleveland schools, Walls believed, took advantage of the abundance of elective subjects instead of challenging themselves with more difficult classes that could better prepare them for college.<sup>223</sup> The lack of such courses at black schools may have been due to the inability of the school district to place qualified teachers in what was likely considered undesirable circumstances. This contributed to the inequality of education that had plagued the black community for generations.

In their March 2, 1964 Position Paper on Educational Needs, the United Freedom Movement declared that “Since Cleveland’s most pressing problem is now educational inequality, it follows that the highest priority should be equalizing educational levels.” The UFM took matters into their own hands that spring, establishing thirty-nine “freedom schools” at churches, the YMCA, Salvation Army, and Karamu House. The schools had students and volunteer teachers of different races and religions, and a curriculum that included instruction in protesting, definitions of freedom, equality, race pride, and an explanation of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Constitution, and other important documents. The Hazeldell Parents Association through CORE also voiced their opposition to the building of three new elementary schools in the Glenville area, which they felt would continue de facto segregation and the inferior quality of education for black students. Radio stations WJMO, WABQ, and KYW, all of which had thousands of young listeners, as well as the Cleveland City Planning

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<sup>223</sup> Charles Sanders, “Little Rock Pupil Here: Cleveland Schools Called ‘Very Sad’,” *Call and Post*, June 20, 1959.

Commission, Cleveland Church Federation, and other community groups supported CORE's efforts to meet with the School Housing Committee to discuss the new schools.

On April 7<sup>th</sup> approximately one thousand demonstrators rallied around the construction site for Stephen E. Howe Elementary School on Lakeview Road. This was the second consecutive day of protest, and The Reverend Bruce W. Klunder, chairman of the local CORE chapter, led a small group through nearby backyards to break through a cordon of Cleveland police officers who were protecting the school site. Three members of the group put themselves in the path of a bulldozer while Reverend Klunder lay down behind it. The driver, trying to avoid the trio in front of him, backed up the machine and unknowingly crushed Klunder to death. Six protesters attacked the bulldozer driver and hundreds of others fought with police for almost two hours. Riots ensued after dark, prompting city officials to outlaw all picketing and public demonstrations. Construction on the Howe school was also postponed until school integration could be further studied by a committee appointed by the school board and civil rights organizations.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> United Freedom Movement, Position Paper on Educational Needs, March 2, 1964, "Upgraded Education," United Freedom Movement Freedom Schools Records, 1963-1965, Container 1, Folder 1, MS 4814, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland; United Freedom Movement, List of Freedom Schools in Mt. Pleasant and Central Areas, United Freedom Movement Freedom Schools Records, 1963-1965, Container 1, Folder 1, MS 4814, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland; United Freedom Movement, "The Civil Rights Movement—Teachers' Guide," 7-8, United Freedom Movement Freedom Schools Records, 1963-1965, Container 1, Folder 1, MS 4814, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland; Teacher Applications, United Freedom Movement Freedom Schools Records, 1963-1965, Container 1, Folder 4, MS 4814, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland; Hazeldell Parents Association, Congress of Racial Equality, Announcement to Members of the Cleveland Board of Education, April 1, 1964, United Freedom Movement Freedom Schools, 1963-1965, Container 1, Folder 6, MS 4814, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland; The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History, "Klunder, Bruce W.," Case Western Reserve University, <http://ech.cwru.edu/ech-cgi/article.pl?id=KBW> (accessed March 18, 2010); "Civil Rights: We Are Dedicated," *Time*, April 17, 1964, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,875789,00.html> (accessed January 13, 2010);

### *The Only Common Thread*

Big changes were on the horizon for the last half of the decade, both in Cleveland and nationwide, and the war in Vietnam was headline news every day. Rock and roll was still the primary musical force in the United States and the preferred style for young Americans, though there were some new branches on the rock tree that guaranteed something for everyone: Motown, soul, beach, hot rod, rhythm and blues, and folk music each had a connection to rock and roll, and the innovation and popularity of each was certainly helped by the rock and roll culture under whose umbrella they grew. Several songs at the top of *Billboard's* Hot 100 spoke to music fans needing something more than a good beat to dance to. Simon & Garfunkel's poetic "Sounds of Silence" was number one as of January 1, 1966. It may not be, at first listen, a song about civil rights or other social issues, but it spoke to the growing isolation that many were feeling at the time, as well as to a willingness of so many to blindly follow; this could refer to following political leaders without question, or to whites who did not speak up against or question racist whites who continued to spread hatred of blacks.<sup>225</sup> The Beatles were growing as artists and started including more meaningful lyrics in their songs. "We Can Work It Out," which reached number two on the Hot 100, is about an argument between friends or lovers, with the narrator pleading to work things out and stop the fighting. It could also be interpreted to be about the generation gap or American racial problems that had made world news.<sup>226</sup> If *Billboard* was an indicator of the popularity of and craving for songs with a message, these lyrics certainly reflect the ideas many songwriters were growing more comfortable expressing to mass popular music audiences. Even though

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<sup>225</sup> Hot 100, *Billboard*, January 1, 1966, 16; Simon & Garfunkel, "Sounds of Silence," Lyrics Depot, <http://www.lyricsdepot.com/simon-garfunkel/sounds-of-silence.html> (accessed March 20, 2010).

<sup>226</sup> The Beatles, *The Beatles, Complete Scores* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1993), 988-991.



folk singer Pete Seeger remarked in 1968 that “No song I can sing will make Governor Wallace change his mind,” popular music can inform and motivate individuals who are the ones who create true change in society.<sup>227</sup>

Seeger may have been right about Wallace, but decidedly political lyrics were beside the point. Music in rock’s early days was devoid of direct political messages. The fact that it appealed to black and white youth made it political in the eyes of rock opponents. Listening to music together, even though “together” might not necessarily mean sharing the same physical space, brought young people of different races together emotionally, intellectually, and culturally. Black southern migrants who moved North during the Second Great Migration forced whites to deal with their racial views in a more direct way as black music made its way into the lives of their children. Though most schoolchildren in Cleveland were not attending integrated schools, they were exposed to other races through music, whether it was performed by black or white artists. In segregated cities music was an important way to bring races together for a common interest, and young people were especially receptive to the idea of mixing socially with people from different races, religions, and ethnic groups. Jamilah Zand remembers attending downtown summer block parties where local bands performed for mixed audiences. “If it wasn’t for the music, what would bring all these people together?” she asks.<sup>228</sup> Rock and roll had been bringing together the younger generation for over a decade and some parents still objected, Lou Ragland believes, because their children “had found out that black people wasn’t all that bad...and it was okay to have a black friend, it was okay to shake their hand and mingle with and dance and live with and talk, because that was America.” “The

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<sup>227</sup> R. Serge Denisoff, “Those on the Top Forty and Those of the Streets,” *American Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1970): 823.

<sup>228</sup> Zand, interview.

music,” Ragland adds, “is the only common thread that holds almost all of the folk together.”<sup>229</sup> Disk jockey Lynn Tolliver feels that music is a universal language that has had a role “in soothing the savage beast in all of us,” though he also says that he doesn’t “think songs can make something happen that isn’t already occurring.”<sup>230</sup>

Black performer John Wilson slightly disagrees. “The music was very important, I think it was the most important ingredient in stopping all this....in giving people the courage to say ‘we’re not taking this anymore’,” he says. “It was the music that basically made all the changes.” Wilson believes that the power of music was important for whites and blacks, who together faced the threat of being shipped off to Vietnam. He and his friends were inspired by boxer Muhammad Ali’s principled and controversial stance against the military draft, but they also understood that there was little they could do to avoid the war. Black Clevelanders not only were dealing with possible overseas deployment but they were always aware of the potential for racial discrimination and violence all over town, even on the mostly black East Side. “Where can we go?” Wilson and his friends wondered. “I knew, sooner or later, something had to give. All of us did.”<sup>231</sup>

Many music fans in Cleveland looked at music as a way to experience freedom, whether it was pure escapism, a search for answers, or a desire to live a different life with different values from the previous generation. For Jean Cotton, music helped her feel free of her minister father’s strict control of the family. She grew up hearing Christian music at home, and later listened to Motown and other popular music. As long as her parents did not hear the music, they did not mind it, though her father did object to

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<sup>229</sup> Ragland, interview.

<sup>230</sup> Tolliver, interview.

<sup>231</sup> Wilson, interview.

certain songs like Wilson Pickett's 1967 "Funky Broadway" because he did not like the word *funky*. Cotton and her siblings played the radio when their parents went out for the evening, but upon returning home their father would feel the radio to see if it were warm. They devised methods to try to trick him, like using a fan and putting a bowl of cold water on top of the radio so it would not get warm after being on for hours. To go to such lengths just to listen to the radio shows how important the music was to young people. "[Those songs] had good beats to them and you could dance to them. But then, when you stop and listen to the words it's like, 'yeah, what's going on?'" Cotton says. "I need to figure out who I am, that was my main point...really seeking freedom." Though the music was a significant part of her life, she says that it did not help her truly find herself or the freedom she craved because that "was something you gotta do" on your own.<sup>232</sup>

Like the music of the 1950s that spoke to the younger generation in terms they could understand and about things they dealt with everyday, the message songs of the 1960s spoke to teenagers about other issues they were concerned with. Author Deanna Adams, who grew up in the small, all-white township of Lakeline, Ohio, recalls lyrics from that era that "'spoke' to us—what we were living through, how we felt, and how important 'freedom' was to us all."<sup>233</sup> Bill Spoon of The Soul Notes is adamant in his belief that songs should have a message—and a solution. "I want to be able to get a message, a positive message," he explains, "and if it's a negative kind of a situation I want you to give me a positive resolution somewhere in that song."

Motown artist Marvin Gaye was deeply affected by media coverage of racial violence and his inability to speak out publicly. "My stomach got real tight and my heart started

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<sup>232</sup> Cotton, interview.

<sup>233</sup> Deanna Adams, email message to author, March 19, 2010.

beating like crazy,” he said about hearing radio reports of the 1965 Watts riots. “I wanted to throw the radio down and burn all the bullshit songs I’d been singing and get out there and kick ass with the rest of the brothers,” he recalled. “I knew they were going about it wrong, I knew what they were thinking, but I understood an anger that builds up over years...and I felt myself exploding.” Gaye longed to sing about his feelings regarding the violence and other social issues, but his boss Gordy refused to permit such expression. “Music’s supposed to sell. That’s [Gordy’s] trip. And it was mine,” Gaye later admitted.<sup>234</sup>

Though Gordy continued avoiding overtly political messages in Motown’s songs, he could not help people from interpreting some of them as revolutionary. Black activist Ronald Snellings argued for the role of rhythm and blues in the movement in an October 1965 article in the black radical magazine the *Liberator*:

We sing in our young hearts, we sing in our angry Black Souls. ...And it’s reflected in...this song of course, “Dancing in the Street”—making Martha and the Vandellas legendary....“Nowhere to Run, Nowhere to Hide,” “Change is Gonna’ Come” (to the tune of Brother Malcolm shot down in the Audobon...) ...OUR songs are turning from “love,” turning from being “songs,” turning into WAYS, into WAYS, into “THINGS.”<sup>235</sup>

Whatever the song, “if it was sung by a black person, it could be implicated in the racial politics of its time,” says historian Suzanne E. Smith.<sup>236</sup>

But not all white listeners heard or expected a political message in songs. “I didn’t really listen to or take it...that way,” says Joan Orosz. “I just listened to it as a song.”<sup>237</sup> Linda Shisila, who grew up in Parma and had no interaction with blacks as a teenager, did not hear anything political in the music she enjoyed until Crosby, Stills, Nash, and

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<sup>234</sup> Smith, 169-170.

<sup>235</sup> Quoted in Smith, 171.

<sup>236</sup> Smith, 172.

<sup>237</sup> Joan Orosz, interview.

Young's 1970 "Ohio," written about the shooting of four students during a protest at Kent State University, the school she attended shortly thereafter. "Other than that, no, I don't think I really paid much attention to all that," she recalls. "Sometimes I think music should be more for entertainment and enjoyment." Shisila adds, "Maybe people don't really listen to it to get messages."<sup>238</sup> For Shisila, and likely many other young white people who did not live in integrated neighborhoods or attend schools with black students, the songs many black artists sang did not have any significance beyond the music. But even those like Joan Orosz, who went to an integrated school, did not hear any deeper message in the songs they had memorized lyrics to. Shisila reacted to the overt commentary in "Ohio" because it was close to home, literally and figuratively: Kent is approximately one hour from Parma; she had been accepted as a student at the university; and all four victims were white and they were her age.

### *A Smoldering Pocket*

While activists marched and protested in Cleveland and across the nation, President Lyndon Johnson pushed for further civil rights legislation. Black southerners continued to face obstacles when trying to vote or register to vote, despite the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, signed in August, eliminated literacy testing at voter registration sites and guaranteed blacks the right to vote. In Selma, Alabama, where King had begun organizing a voting rights campaign earlier in the year, sixty percent of the city's black residents registered to vote within a month.<sup>239</sup> Progress, to be sure, but just a few days after President Johnson signed the act the nation's focus shifted

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<sup>238</sup> Shisila, interview.

<sup>239</sup> Dierenfield, 118-119.

to a drunk-driving arrest in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles that turned violent when police began to beat the combative driver. This event turned into ten days of vandalism that cost forty-five million dollars in property losses, as well as the deaths of thirty-four people, one thousand injuries, and four thousand arrests.<sup>240</sup>

Riots generally do not emerge from a single incident, and Watts was no exception. Police brutality, unemployment, and poverty were some of the issues at the heart of the Watts riots and subsequent violence and vandalism. National Guardsmen were called in after local businesses were looted and burned. White-owned businesses were targeted by rioters, and black-owned establishments put up window signs reading “This is a Negro business” and “Brother, Okay” to deter criminal attacks.<sup>241</sup> Shortly after Watts erupted Chicago had its own race riot that lasted two days, injured seventy-nine people, and resulted in over a hundred arrests.<sup>242</sup> Similar violence took place in Harlem that August, though Cleveland and Detroit were relatively safe.

The *Call and Post*'s Bob Williams asked readers how Cleveland's atmosphere fared in comparison to Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit. “Is there a smouldering [sic] pocket somewhere, long ignored, in which uncontrollable hatred and contempt is being built up among the have nots, those who do NOT belong to this great society?” Williams also wondered if the city of Cleveland had a civil rights program in place to deal with the problems of poverty, police brutality, inadequate schools, and other issues. “Does the city of Cleveland, like Detroit, and now, Los Angeles, admit such problems actually

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<sup>240</sup> Smith, 169.

<sup>241</sup> Ches Washington, “Why Angry L.A. Negroes Ran Amuck: Arrest Sparks Nation's Worst Riot,” *Call and Post*, August 21, 1965.

<sup>242</sup> “79 Hurt in Chicago Riot,” *Call and Post*, August 21, 1965.

exist?”<sup>243</sup> Cleveland remained free of major racial violence throughout the rest of 1965 and early 1966, though there was always tension bubbling beneath the surface. There were problems in other cities but Cleveland, for now, was fairly safe.

The 1965 riots in Watts were not the first such incidents, but they represent a milestone event around which subsequent riots revolve. Less than a year later another police incident led to a riot in Watts, resulting in far fewer casualties than in the 1965 violence, though two innocent men, one white and one black, were killed by gunfire.<sup>244</sup> At the time of the first Watts riot the *Call and Post* wondered: “Could a Watts-type riot occur in Cleveland?” A few months after the second Watts riot, a ten-year-old black boy in Cleveland was shot by a white man whose car was hit by a rock thrown by the youth. When police refused to take a description of the shooter several young witnesses began throwing rocks at the officers, resulting in four nights of violence in the Hough and Glenville areas.<sup>245</sup> At the same time there was more violence in Murray Hill, when a black delicatessen owner, Bill Jones, had the windshield of his new Cadillac smashed in by a group of white teenagers. The man was visiting an Italian friend’s delicatessen when the incident occurred, and while his friend confronted some of the teens Jones drove to a gas station to call the police. He waited almost an hour before the police arrived to make a report about the incident. Upon returning home, several kids in Jones’s neighborhood asked about the damage to his car and, when he explained what had happened the youths started throwing rocks at passing cars. Jones again called police, hoping to convince them that he had not encouraged the rock-throwing. “I feel this type

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<sup>243</sup> Bob Williams, Bobbing Along, *Call and Post*, September 4, 1965.

<sup>244</sup> “Charge Police Brutality, Two Slain In Watts Flareup,” *Call and Post*, March 19, 1966.

<sup>245</sup> Ken Temple, “Cleveland Calm After A Week Of Racial Tension,” *Call and Post*, July 2, 1966.

of riotous action which is taking place these days is foolish,” he said. “And it surely doesn’t help our cases.”<sup>246</sup>

Articles about both of these events appeared in the July 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the *Call and Post*, as did a front-page editorial entitled “Time Is Running Out” that anticipated a larger-scale riot.<sup>247</sup> The *Plain Dealer* barely mentioned these incidents and other racial violence, but the *Call and Post* ran multiple stories and opinion pieces every week about what they saw as a ticking time bomb. Lou Ragland believes that there was a certain amount of sensationalism in all the Cleveland papers’ reporting of the riots, saying that they “made it bigger than it was.” Since the *Plain Dealer* did not have reporters in black neighborhoods prior to the Hough riots, Ragland says, they did not understand what was going on and could not have reported it. The *Call and Post*, he believes, was trying to sell newspapers with their extensive coverage of every racial incident in Greater Cleveland.<sup>248</sup>

The *Cleveland Press* reported on the first night of what was to become known as the Hough riots. The article simply lists excerpts from police radio broadcasts:

“Six to go from 8304 Hough. Looting.” Minutes later, “A mob forming here, get some cars here on the double.”

Time is now 1:22. “At E. 85<sup>th</sup> St. and Hough. Foremen pulling out—being shot at. Send a car to escort them back in.”

“Man badly shot at Crawford and Hough. Take him to Mount Sinai Hospital.”

“Dean’s Record Shop at E. 66<sup>th</sup> and Lexington Ave. looted.”

“Bill’s Bar burned to the ground at E. 86<sup>th</sup> and Hough Ave.”<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> “Damage Businessman’s Car In Murray Hill Incident,” *Call and Post*, July 2, 1966.

<sup>247</sup> “Time Is Running Out,” *Call and Post*, July 2, 1966.

<sup>248</sup> Ragland, interview.

<sup>249</sup> Jerry Kvet, “All Night Police Radio Droned: ‘Store Burning...Looting...Help Needed,’” *Cleveland Press*, July 19, 1966.



The refusal of a white bartender to serve a glass of water to a black patron at the Seventy-Niners Café at East 79<sup>th</sup> Street and Hough Avenue precipitated the events of July 18, 1966 and the following week of violence.<sup>250</sup> Young, local blacks were blamed for the looting and damage to property, and a *Press* reporter witnessed items she assumed were the spoils of inner city war being sold cheaply to people near the Bell Neighborhood Center on East 81<sup>st</sup> Street. “People are mad. They’re mad at everything,” one young black man told Pat Royse from the *Press*. “It would help if the police stopped bugging us all the time, picking up people on the streets for no reason.” A twenty-five-year-old man told Royse he had been in the Seventy-Niners bar when the trouble started. He overheard the owner tell a barmaid, “Don’t serve no niggers no water” before he placed a sign in the window saying “No Ice Water.” The young man said that there was very little for kids to do, no place to go for fun or recreation. The only available gym was the Fairfax Recreation Center but it was too small for every boy in town to use at once. “Can’t go to Rockefeller Park because they get in fights with white boys,” he explained. “People around here are not holding still for some things that have gone on.”<sup>251</sup>

The Dean’s House of Jazz record stores were within close proximity to the Hough riots. Charm Warren-Celestine remembers her parents putting up signs indicating that the business was black-owned in hopes that they would be left alone by rioters. Though police were called to the location at East 66<sup>th</sup> and Lexington, Warren-Celestine recalls that none of her parents’ stores were damaged. “We were really lucky,” she says. Her parents did have sleepless nights during that time, and her father stayed inside the

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<sup>250</sup> The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History, “Hough Riots,” Case Western Reserve University, <http://ech.cwru.edu/ech-cgi/article.pl?id=HR3> (accessed March 23, 2010).

<sup>251</sup> Pat Royse, “Hough’s Looters Offer ‘Bargains,’” *Cleveland Press*, July 20, 1966.

Crawford and Hough location to protect it from looters and violence. None of the stores closed during the riots because they were the only source of income for the family, though the situation was tense. "...I think black people were protesting how they were being treated by those people in the community that owned businesses in the community but didn't live there," she believes. "So you're extracting...money from the community, not living there, not putting it back into the community."<sup>252</sup> Add to that police harassment, poverty, and school inequality, and it is a recipe for a riot.

Mayor Locher requested that the Ohio National Guard step in on the morning of July 20<sup>th</sup> to bring order back to the neighborhood. "They are soldiers, and to them, this is war," said a *Call and Post* editorial. "Their job is to stop this violence before it spreads throughout the entire community. Once order has been restored, perhaps a new sense of urgency will replace the lassitude that has characterized City Hall efforts to provide hope for a segment of its citizenry whose only crime is that they are black."<sup>253</sup> The Mayor also closed down all taverns and bars in the area, and some businesses closed voluntarily until things began to quiet down by July 25<sup>th</sup>. By that date four people had been killed, thirty injured, approximately three hundred arrested, and 240 fires had been reported over the week of rioting.<sup>254</sup>

### *Us vs. Them*

Most black youth in the Hough neighborhood had not been looting and setting fires. Davit Nesbit, a seventeen-year-old former member of the Job Corps, worked long shifts on the switchboard at the Hough Opportunity Center, which remained open around the

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<sup>252</sup> Warren-Celestine, interview.

<sup>253</sup> "It Did Happen Here," *Call and Post*, July 23, 1966.

<sup>254</sup> The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History, "Hough Riots."

clock during the riots. Nesbit dropped out of high school when his mother became ill and later completed his education in the Men's Job Corps in Montana. He was not the only teenager to do his part during this time of crisis. Workers for Christ, the youth group from the University Church of Christ on East 89<sup>th</sup> Street, donated clothing to victims of the riots.<sup>255</sup> Though there were many other stories of young people like these who tried rebuilding their community, it was the angry, violent black youth who received the most attention. The voice of the angry, frustrated "Johnny" was "tired of taking what mama and papa took so long sitting down," wrote columnist Bob Williams shortly after the Hough riots. "Negro parents without the guts to protest bred the spirit of rebellion into the hearts of their children, who heard their parents mumbling in their sleep. They got mad. Damned mad."<sup>256</sup>

Most white teenagers did not live near the neighborhoods engulfed in rioting, nor were they likely to have had friends who did. But those who listened to black radio could hear about the riots even though many of their parents said little at home. White deejays generally steered clear of talk about the riots. "The jocks on WIXY and WHK in 1966 and 1967 were there to entertain and spoke very little of anything negative," remembers Mike Olszewski. "Some of the urban stations like WABQ actually tried to calm their audiences, many of whom lived in riot zones."<sup>257</sup> Bill Spoon remembers black disk jockeys' on-air conversations about the situation in Hough, and says that they felt a responsibility to make personal appearances in black communities to try to restore peace. WJMO's Ken Hawkins was involved with community activities before the riots, and he

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<sup>255</sup> "Youth To The Rescue," *Call and Post*, July 30, 1966.

<sup>256</sup> Bob Williams, *Bobbing Along*, *Call and Post*, July 30, 1966.

<sup>257</sup> Mike Olszewski, email to author, February 3, 2010.

made even more of a point at this time to be out among the people to attempt to calm everyone down.<sup>258</sup>

Jamilah Zand was twelve years old at the time of the Hough riots. “My most vivid image of the riots was when I walked down Superior Avenue and saw the after-effects” a few days after the situation had ended. She was visiting an aunt who lived on East 105<sup>th</sup> Street near Superior when she and some cousins and friends went for a walk, curious to see what they had heard about in the news. The Liberty movie house, the only one the girls frequented, had been burned out, and Zand wondered if it or any of the other burned buildings would ever be fixed.<sup>259</sup> Though music may have provided a bit of consolation under these dramatic circumstances, witnessing the destruction first-hand was overwhelming, especially for those Zand’s age.

White Clevelanders generally avoided Hough—where they had once been the majority—even before the riots, and few were brave enough to go near the neighborhood during or after. “It wasn’t the place you wanted to be,” remembers James Orosz. He believes the cause of the riots had to do with poverty and “the general conditions of where some people had to live,” which created a feeling of frustration that could no longer be contained.<sup>260</sup> Mike Olszewski agrees. “There was a lot of racial tension, but I didn’t see it among young people as much,” adding that “it was mostly about poor communities against the police.” Olszewski grew up in several integrated ethnic neighborhoods and was aware from a young age of the racial tension around Greater Cleveland. He says that he and others his age were asking, “Wait a minute, why are people fighting? Why are people rioting?” They believed it was more about rich against

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<sup>258</sup> Bill Spoon, email to author, February 5, 2010.

<sup>259</sup> Zand, interview.

<sup>260</sup> James Orosz, interview.

poor.<sup>261</sup> Entertainer and Cleveland native Bob Hope expressed his concern about the situation in Hough, remembering that there was a feeling of resentment decades before when he lived nearby. “I’m seriously afraid that a lot more thought must be given to the problems which are creating this violence,” he said in 1966, citing segregated schools as part of the issue. “Something must be done—they’ve got to start giving these people something instead of just talking about it.”<sup>262</sup>

Joan Orosz, who grew up in Mayfield Heights and attended an integrated school, believes that the root of racial tension in Cleveland had more to do with the black community’s insistence on desegregation than with the poverty, police harassment, and inequality of education many lived with. “I think things would have been a lot better off if [black people] wouldn’t have been pressing the desegregation so much, and *them them them*, it’s all about *them*,” she explains. She echoes the sentiments of many whites who did not wish to be forcibly integrated with black residents. “I don’t think that the problems between the blacks and whites today would be as bad as they are if they would have just gelled, instead of the blacks bringing up all the time about *them* having nothing,” she states. “You shouldn’t have to interact” with anyone if you do not want to.<sup>263</sup>

Rock and roll had only so much influence on the racial attitudes of Clevelanders like Joan Orosz. She acknowledges the bigotry of her parents, and though some children in similar circumstances used rock and roll to rebel against the prejudice of older generations, the music Joan enjoys is separate from her views on race. Attending an integrated school and having a black best friend are compatible with her love of Motown

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<sup>261</sup> Olszewski, interview.

<sup>262</sup> “Bob Hope Gives Serious Views On Race Problem,” *Jet*, September 15, 1966, 55.

<sup>263</sup> Joan Orosz, interview.

and other black-inspired music, and she acknowledges that “music brings people together.” Ultimately, however, the realities of daily racial conflict could not be overcome by the shared experience of music. The younger generation certainly made an impact on modern American society as it challenged traditional attitudes and behaviors through rock and roll music, but in the minds of many young Clevelanders in 1966 it was still *us vs. them*, no matter what records they bought.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The first decade and a half of rock and roll presented challenges and opportunities for the people of Greater Cleveland and the United States to deal with the racial issues that dominated American politics and society. The Second Great Migration brought millions of southerners to the North and contributed to the cultural education of whites through rock and roll music. This music was the first exposure many white people had had to black culture in any way, aside from stereotypes they learned as children. Young people were in a unique situation to create change in America through music and their interaction with people of other races. But the increased number of southerners and immigrants from Europe and Asia created more than diversity; housing shortages, overcrowded schools, and discrimination made the post-Second World War era one of confusion, frustration and violence.

Cleveland has a history of black activism, and local chapters of the NAACP and CORE, among others, worked for decades to foster interracial cooperation and support black families in need. The Cleveland Community Relations Board worked with the

municipal government to promote dialogue and understanding among people of different backgrounds, and to resolve complaints of discrimination. Cleveland's reputation as "the best location in the nation" was not a reality for black residents, though there were cultural arenas like Karamu House and Leo's Casino where race did not matter, but peace and creativity did.

Everyday life in Cleveland in the 1950s was segregated, even as rock and roll became the primary musical force for young people in the city and across the country. Deejay Alan Freed's Moondog Coronation Ball in March 1952 caused a riot when too many tickets were sold, but it cemented Freed's place in history by showing the power of music. The vast majority of Moondog attendees were black, causing middle class blacks to complain that white promoters and deejays were taking advantage of and exploiting the black teenagers who listened to Freed's popular radio show. The white press did not pay as much attention nor did it give such criticism of Freed, the concert, or the music young people were obsessed with. Only when large numbers of white youth began listening to the music did white parents and critics start to take notice of the potential danger of this black music. Rock and roll was not overtly political in its formative years, at least not lyrically speaking. What it did accomplish was the bridging of the racial divide as it offended and scared racists, creating controversy and making young people realize the significance of their music—and their generation.

Teenagers had become a distinct social group with economic and cultural power. Never before had youth been such an important factor in music, movies, radio, television, fashion, and politics. Magazines and newspapers featured articles about teens and their slang, social lives, and ideas about modern life. Many of them blamed adults for the poor



state of race relations in America and were determined to do better. Music was one way they learned about tolerance and communication with people they had been taught they were not supposed to be friends with. Race was not as much of an issue to the post-war generation; that is, many of these young people did not wish to continue the segregation that their parents and grandparents took for granted. Kids were looking to do something new.

Though Cleveland was known for “breaking” new musical artists from around the country, and though there was no shortage of talent in the city itself, it was another massively segregated Midwestern city that created a musical empire that would dominate the scene in the 1960s. Berry Gordy’s Motown Records put Detroit on the map for something other than the automobile industry. Detroit’s proximity to Cleveland meant that Motown artists would frequently visit the city’s clubs, especially hot spots like the integrated Leo’s Casino. If a performer did well in Cleveland, Gordy knew they were ready to go national; if not, they returned to the Motor City to keep practicing. Motown’s success was at once a point of pride for the black community across America and further proof that black artists appealed to music fans of every color.

Black-inspired music was the soundtrack of American life into the turbulent 1960s, while the South continued Jim Crow years after *Brown* outlawed segregation in public schools. Cleveland’s black population grew, and racial incidents were headline news throughout the decade. Black families moving into previously all-white neighborhoods were often met with violence and threats, but were determined to live where they liked and hoped to create a better future for their children. Many white Clevelanders joined civil rights and community organizations to promote integration. The United Freedom

Movement created its own schools to counter segregated education, but the experiment was short-lived when one of its leaders was crushed by a bulldozer during a protest at a school construction site. Interracial Home Visit Day also attempted to promote racial understanding, and though thousands of Greater Clevelanders took part in the yearly event it is difficult to determine what impact it had; most participants were probably already open to friendly relations with those from different backgrounds. Still, it showed that there were significant numbers of Clevelanders committed to integration and community.

Major riots rocked Cleveland and other cities between 1965 and 1968, and smaller racial disturbances were regular features of big city life. Even after electing the nation's first black mayor of a major city, Cleveland's racial discord was never far beneath the surface. Young people and black nationalists were often blamed for riots and looting, and though there were those in the younger generation who advocated Malcolm X's philosophy of achieving goals "by any means necessary," most did not subscribe to such methods. The Cold War world already appeared unsafe and confusing, but with violence in their communities and against national leaders who meant so much to young people many felt lost and had only their music to comfort them.

Motown artists like Marvin Gaye and The Temptations felt a powerful need to speak out through their music, but Gordy was hesitant to allow that until the late 1960s. White artists, however, started including socially relevant lyrics in their music in the early part of the decade. Both black and white artists felt a responsibility to use their platform to call attention to social problems and to try to soothe tensions when they could. Black Cleveland radio stations WABQ and WJMO did their part to provide community forums

and events, and to keep Cleveland calm during times of civil unrest. Daytime station WABQ deserves part of the credit for helping Cleveland remain peaceful after the King assassination. They were granted FCC permission to stay on-air for five straight days, commercial-free, to provide a forum for the community to speak about King, and to play soft music to ease listeners' grief. WABQ took to the air after their broadcast day was finished during the Glenville riot a few months later. Listeners came to rely upon their favorite radio stations for information and comfort on such occasions.

Radio, television, and the mass production of newspapers and magazines made it possible to spread the word, positive or negative to millions of people at once and instantly. Song lyrics were simultaneously more personal and more relevant to society than ever before, as artists felt obligated to use their platform to speak out about the problems in American society. "As recording artists and producers, we have the most powerful voice on this planet, next to the powers that be," says Cleveland performer John Wilson. "Basically, we have more power than [they do] because we can reach, through our music...anybody we need to get to in the world. And it's our responsibility to try to make peace in this planet and better understanding between people."<sup>264</sup>

Cleveland's racial problems did not improve significantly in the two decades after the city won the National Council of Christians and Jews' top Relations Center Award for 1951. Little Italy and Collinwood were consistent hotbeds of racist violence, and white flight was creating additional segregated neighborhoods. Schools were more integrated than they had been after the Second World War, but with whites moving to the suburbs, many city schools were majority black and not receiving the help they needed to compete. Many of the kids who grew up in the early days of rock and roll were now in

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<sup>264</sup> Wilson, interview.

college, married, or working. Their views on race had been shaped by their families, friends, and the music they enjoyed. Singer George Hendricks believes that the music was highly influential in building bridges between the races. “That’s what started people talking to each other, getting to know each other,” he says. “The music was the dominating factor in the world then....everybody had one common thing they could relate to, and that was the music.”<sup>265</sup>

The music of the 1950s and 1960s had the potential to make positive, long-lasting changes in the racial attitudes of its young fans. Though it certainly brought black artists to the center of the musical universe and was able to reach places formal politics could not, ultimately, it did not maintain the momentum started in rock’s first decade. The *Billboard* charts system was briefly desegregated at the height of Motown’s popularity in 1963, only to return to separate categories for pop and rhythm and blues music in early 1965. Radio stations in Cleveland were known by that time as “black” or “white,” though they played music by artists of both races. Racial violence committed by young whites plagued Little Italy and Collinwood into the 1970s.

Today, we have black television networks, radio stations, and hip hop magazines, and the music charts remain segregated into what are essentially black and white styles, though hip hop and rap music are the dominant genres of the past twenty years. American culture remains segregated in the arts, though there are still white fans of black music and television, many of whom face criticism for trying to “act black” similar to what white teens in the 1950s endured. Many cities, neighborhoods and schools are still not integrated, and the effects of white flight in decades past continue to have an impact on property values and school funding. The election of an American president of mixed

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<sup>265</sup> Hendricks, interview.

racial heritage is one marker of progress in attitudes about race, though it does not indicate that the nation is significantly closer to eradicating bigotry for once and for all.

Many rock fans did not change their attitudes about race, but rock and roll, which was born of and popularized by the confluence of young people and dramatic social and political events during the Second Great Migration, shed light on the problems of the day and gave hope, pride, and motivation to legions of followers. Young people became the new leaders of American culture, and though they did not all march to exactly the same beat they did make a difference. In those first fifteen years, it was more than just a catchy musical beat; it was the heartbeat of a movement whose impact we live with to this day.

A change to a new type of music is something to be aware  
of as a hazard to all our fortunes. For the modes of music are never  
disturbed without [an] unsettling of the most fundamental  
political and social conventions.<sup>266</sup>

--Plato

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<sup>266</sup> Bertrand, 17.

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