DJ Chapter

By Ken Barnes

> *"All right, Moondog, get in there, kid. Howl it out, buddy … Hello, everybody, how are you all tonight? This is Alan Freed, the old King of the Moondoggers, and it's time again for another of your favorite Rock and Roll sessions – blues and rhythm records for all the gang in the Moondog Kingdom, from the Midwest to the East Coast." – 1952, WJW/Cleveland*

The birth of Rock and Roll on the radio came at the right time in the right place with the right stuff. A unique convergence of cultural and technological trends spawned a revolution of style and substance. Among the key factors:

--The post-World War II economic boom that created the modern teenager: kids with leisure time and cash to indulge their interests, an impressionable and highly desirable audience for media and advertisers alike.

--The most potent threat yet to AM radio's cultural dominance – television, which mushroomed from 10,000 sets in 1946 to 27 million in 1952 – necessitating new ways of presenting programming on the radio.

--The introduction of a superior and convenient configuration for consuming music: RCA's 45-rpm single, which, beginning in 1949, displaced fragile and bulky 78-rpm discs and sparked a fierce battle for commercial supremacy with CBS' contemporaneous 33-rpm long-play album.

--The rise of independent record labels catering to minority audiences that preferred rhythm & blues (R&B), jazz or country (then called hillbilly) music to the pop and dance-band stylings that had prevailed since the '30s.

--The cross-fertilization of country musicians steeped in the blues and blues and R&B singers influenced by country, which -- with a dose of melodramatic pop balladeering and a healthy dollop of street-corner doo-wop vocalizing -- produced the ungainly and all-conquering hybrid Rock and Roll.

Riding this wave was a school of radio disc jockeys, a 1941 *Variety* coinage for the increasing number of radio hosts playing recorded music. Black and white, young and middle-aged, they seemed to spring up all over the country by a sort of fated synchronicity. They latched onto the audience for what was then called, by trade publication *Billboard*, “race music” -- later renamed R&B by *Billboard* staffer and later Atlantic Records principal Jerry Wexler. And in many cases, they learned that race music’s listeners were not limited to its culture of origin. Once musicians and record companies got a handle on the same phenomenon, Rock and Roll came to life.

Radio in the late 1940s and early 1950s was for the most part a creaky and antiquated media mechanism. The remnants of traditional network content were still a key programming component, but these nationally distributed scripted comedies, serial dramas and game shows were already migrating to television. But the bulk of the broadcast day comprised “blocks” of programming. These ~~blocks~~ ranged from political and religious tracts to ethnic programming to local classical or country concerts (in the mode of the Grand Ole Opry, which started in 1925). Since the early 1930s, when Al Jarvis’ “The World’s Largest Make-Believe Ballroom” began in 1932 over KFWB/Los Angeles – emulated more famously as “The Make-Believe Ballroom” by Martin Block in 1935 at WNEW/New York – the most common blocks were presentations of pop, swing or light jazz hosted by a local DJ.

Programming blocks were often sold by stations – or the hosts themselves -- to a sponsor. Stations tended to reserve the prime daytime and early-evening hours for network or locally originated programming, selling chunks of time in late evenings, overnights and weekends to the highest bidder. So in 1951, a successful Akron, Ohio, DJ by name of Alan Freed landed an evening block on Cleveland’s WJW.

Freed was 29, at first playing classical music on his show. A local record-store owner named Leo Mintz, who had secured the radio gig for Freed, told Freed that R&B records were selling in his store and convinced Freed to air some on his show (thus staking a claim as one of Rock and Roll’s unsung founding fathers). Beginning in July 1951, Freed, styling himself as “Moondog” after blind New York street musician Louis “Moondog” Hardin’s “Moondog Symphony,” rapidly built a strong following for the show. He howled like, well, a Moondog, sang along with records and audibly pounded on phone books. Although he never quite shed the pear-shaped tones and precise enunciation of the elegant early masters of radio ceremonies, he developed a smooth line of hipster patter. His, regular-guy demeanor lent sincerity to the endless litanies of dedications that, along with plugs for sponsors such as local beer staple Erin Brew, made up the bulk of his chatter.

An integral part of that chatter was the term “Rock and Roll.” The phrase itself, in many variants mostly pertaining to sex (much like the origin of the term “jazz”), dates back to the dawn of the recording era, if not further back into the 19th century.- A 1934 top 10 hit by the Boswell Sisters used it as its title, though in a more innocuous context. Freed played a number of songs that mentioned “rockin’ ” and/or “rollin’,” and juxtaposed the words shortly after his R&B show debuted, though only to describe the program, not the music itself. That distinction increasingly blurred. Freed moved to New York in 1954. Whether Freed was the first to call the music Rock and Roll is difficult to establish (although in New York he did try to take out a copyright on the phrase, and hammered it incessantly on-air), but his nationwide notoriety made him history’s de facto popularizer.

An operator by nature, Freed not only developed cordial relationships with local and national record promoters but also ventured into concert promotion around Cleveland. This venture had a traumatic beginning at the “Moondog Coronation Ball” in March 1952, when 10,000 or so tickets were sold for a show starring the Dominoes at the Cleveland Arena and large numbers of ticketless fans howed up. (Freed’s audiences in Cleveland were, according to his biographer John A. Jackson, mostly black; the DJ picked up on the increasingly integrated nature of his concert crowds when he moved eastward the next year, although he glossed over that point in later interviews that conjured an image of Rock and Roll-generated integration appearing to him in a flash of inspiration at Mintz’s record store.) Some of the ticketless fans stormed the arena, the show was stopped, and the next morning’s newspapers conjured images of a “crushing mob, hepcats” that “crash[ed the] arena gate.” Freed spent the bulk of that day’s show telling his side of the story and making emotional pitches to “stick with the Moondog” or he would “leave the radio.”

He didn’t, of course. In the long run, although the furor made him a marked man in Cleveland, it didn’t do Freed any harm. More serious was an April 1953 auto accident that punctured a lung, damaged his spleen and liver and necessitated plastic surgery and hundreds of stitches on his face. Doctors gave him 10 years to live … if he stopped drinking … which he did not.

He was back on the air in June, and continued to promote shows, without untoward incident and with lucrative returns. In 1953 he was first heard over New York airwaves, via Newark, N.J., station WNJR, whose lineup featured pre-taped shows from top R&B DJs including Los Angeles' Hunter Hancock. Capitalizing on his Big Apple exposure, Freed promoted a concert in Newark in April 1954, starring the Clovers, the Harptones, Muddy Waters and Charles Brown. It was a smash, and

tellingly, *Billboard* reported about 20% of the audience was white.

Here was proof that race music's appeal was not limited to a single race. Defying the strictures of a culture segregated by longstanding custom, white fans made the effort to attend an R&B concert out of sheer love of the beat, the sound, the attitude of the music they had discovered on the radio. Multitudes more, not yet ready to see the shows in person, were picking up on the sounds on shows presented by Freed and like-minded compatriots.

In September, Freed made the jump to New York City, the No. 1 radio market, when stagnating New York station WINS offered him the 11 p.m.-2 a.m. shift. In the nation's media capital, Freed quickly became the pre-eminent personality among a growing throng of popular DJs, and was ideally situated to capitalize on R&B's new hybrid offshoot, rock 'n' roll, and the audience that was poised to embrace it.

Freed did not achieve national prominence in a vacuum, however. There were others mining the territory. Bill Randle played jump blues and other early forms of R&B in Detroit throughout most of the '40s, and in 1949 migrated to Cleveland, where he was regarded as every bit as influential a hit-maker and concert promoter as Freed. "Symphony" Sid Torin gained great popularity in New York playing R&B in the early '40s. When Freed moved to that city, his competition included Tommy "Dr. Jive" Smalls and, later, up from Philadelphia, Jocko Henderson, popularizer of the immortal phrase "Great Googa Mooga." Memphis' Bill Gordon began playing R&B records on WMPS in 1946. At Nashville's powerful WLAC, John "R." Richbourg and Gene Nobles spread the R&B epidemic all over the country.

Ed "Jack the Bellboy" McKenzie on WJBK/Detroit added R&B into his pop and jazz programs around 1946-47., A couple of years later, LeRoi G. White, on WJLB, became the hottest black DJ in the Motor City, later succeeded by "Frantic" Ernie Durham. "Jumpin' " George Oxford introduced R&B to his KWBR/Oakland show in 1947. Zenas "Daddy" Sears started a blues show in Atlanta in 1948 and in 1956 launched WAOK, an early all-R&B-formatted station. Craig "Porky" Chedwick rhymed his patter and provided R&B to Pittsburgh as early as 1948. George "Hound Dog" Lorenz played R&B around the turn of the '50s at WJJL in Niagara Falls, N.Y., later reigning in Buffalo. Tom Donahue spun R&B discs at WINX in the Washington, D.C., area in 1949 before taking his act to Philadelphia.

Hunter Hancock Runs the Musical Gamut

In 1943 in Los Angeles, a 27-year-old Texas disc jockey named Hunter Hancock

landed an hour-long Sunday show called "Harlem Holiday" on KFVD. Originally designed "to appeal to the Negro community" by airing jazz, the show would shift to R&B in 1947, arguably becoming the first show in the Western U.S. devoted to the music.

> *"Hello, everyone, this is Hunter Hancock, o-o-old H.H., speaking to you direct from Hollywood. I know we'll find some favorites of yours as we hunt through my record rack today, because it holds the latest and greatest records, which runs the musical gamut from bebop to ballads – swing to sweet — and blues to boogie. Featuring some of the greatest and most popular Negro musicians in the world." – 1952, KFVD/Los Angeles, "Huntin' With Hunter," syndicated nationally and aired on WNJR/Newark, N.J.*

Hancock's "Harlem Holiday" was successful enough that it was expanded to a daily half-hour "Harlem Matinee." He also played jazz on this program until, he related in a career recap he wrote for the Doo-Wop Society of Southern California, a Modern Records rep named Jack Allison (another unsung incubator of Rock and Roll) told him, "Hancock, you're playing the wrong records. If you want to reach a huge Negro audience, you should be playing race records." Hancock took the hint, claiming to be "the first announcer, black or white, to specialize in what later became known as rhythm and blues," a claim he later geographically reduced to the Western regions.

The musical shift paid off – Hancock's show was expanded to three and a half hours a day, was syndicated nationally, and led him to promote talent shows and, like Freed, concerts. His "Midnight Matinee" R&B shows at the Olympic Auditorium and the Orpheum Theater attracted, like Freed's New York-area concerts, an audience comprising blacks, whites and Hispanics.

Of the pioneer R&B DJs, Hancock may have been the goofiest, giggling, howling and sending up the deliberately hideous falsetto he concocted to sing along with records; mock-sobbing through tearjerker ballads; intoning the magic (and reverse) spell "Kcocnah Retnuh" to "bring a record to life" (translation: introduce an in-studio guest); and dishing out a few barbs at the record labels who supported him: "Next on 'Hunting With Hunter,' our Disc of the Day, a brand-new recording that shows every indication of becoming a future hit record … the manufacturers *hope*."

While he was capable of conducting a straight artist interview or conventional back-announcement of a record's artist and title, he was just as likely to treat his listeners to a spiel of alliterative nonsense such as this response to the Clovers' Fool, Fool,

Fool, delivered in a creaky, Walter Brennan-esque voice: “You know, it’s fine to feel foolish if a female is filling you with a foolish feeling you’re feeling about the female, fool, fool, fool. Ol’ H.H. says it’s cool to feel a fool and want to drool…”

No one could have possibly labored under the misconception that Hancock was black, but it didn’t matter, thanks to his longstanding close ties to the African-American community (he also had a black on-air sidekick, Marjorie “Margie” Williams) and support for the music. A relatively integrated scene in what had become a significant music capital allowed Hancock, and other white R&B devotees including DJ Dick “Huggy Boy” Hugg, producers/writers/entrepreneurs Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, and DJ/producer/writer/bandleader/entrepreneur Johnny Otis, to flourish alongside such early black radio notables as KOWL’s Joe Adams, later Ray Charles’ longtime manager.

Black Radio Pioneers

Adams was more the exception than the rule; Los Angeles did not abound with black DJ stars.' In general, while black music was gaining exposure on radio across the country at the dawn of the ‘50s, opportunities for black DJs were scarcer, owing mainly to the near-monopoly of station ownership by whites (the first black-owned station, WERD, launched in Atlanta in 1949) and prevailing prejudices facing aspiring blacks in any profession during that era.

Still, a few black voices were heard. In Chicago, where Jack Cooper’s “All-Negro Hour” on WSBC began in 1929 and first featured records in 1932, such jocks as Al Benson and Herb Kent made their marks. Atlanta’s WERD featured Jack Gibson, a force in R&B for half a century; and Baltimore, Philadelphia and later New York had Jocko Henderson and his space-age lingo.

Perhaps the strongest black presence on the radio could be found in Memphis. It was a hotbed of blues and R&B, and listeners ate it up (even today, R&B, hip-hop and gospel dominate the ratings as in no other big city). More important, it was the home of the first R&B-formatted station, WDIA, with a stellar staff assembled in 1948 by trailblazing DJ Nat D. Williams., WDIA’s jocks included at various times future recording stars B.B. King and Rufus Thomas; Hot Rod Hulbert, who later became the first full-time black DJ on an all-white station, WITH/Baltimore; Willa Moore, the first black woman to host a regular radio shift; and Martha Jean “The Queen” Steinberg, who went on to become a Detroit radio icon.

Dewey Phillips: Messin' Up Here

Yet even in Memphis, R&B radio's crown jewel, the town was turned upside down by a white jock, the wild and incomparable Dewey Phillips. Phillips wrangled a nighttime gig at WHBQ in October 1949 at age 23, after undistinguished careers selling clothes and baking bread, and won the loyalty of Memphians black and white with a style for which the word "unique" seems thoroughly inadequate.

> *"Get off the turntable, Mabel, you're too old to be goin' 'round with musicians." – c. 1957, WHBQ/Memphis*

Phillips' biographer Louis Cantor, author of *Dewey and Elvis*, sounds as if he's pouring on the purple prose when he describes his subject on the air: "On his show, he was a combination of a kid in a candy store and a bull in a china shop … The feet-to-the-floorboard personality and the revved-up rhetoric spewed forth in a constant fusillade of senseless non sequiturs." But if you get the chance to hear any of the period airchecks that have survived, you'll agree that he may have slightly understated the case.

Phillips conducted conversations with imaginary celebrities (his friend the baseball immortal and announcer Dizzy Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and "Mabel the Cow" among them), sang along or concocted dialogues with the lyrics of the songs he was playing, and extemporized wildly while reading commercials. He would, for example, invite listeners to visit a furniture company, check out the "bedroom suits," and fill a "wheelbar full of horseshoes," concluding as always, "Tell 'em Phillips sentcha." He garbled text or miscued records constantly, quickly blaming outside factors ("dadgum cold pills"; "this pea-pickin' mike") or himself: "You're messin' up here, birdbrain"; "Wait a minute, Phillips, you're flat messin' up here … I got a morphine shot, can't see so good."

All of this seemingly unpremeditated flow was delivered in an often nearly impenetrable (to non-local ears, anyway), molasses-like Southern accent that wove a spell over Memphians, whom he could persuade to do just about anything. One unforgettable night he requested listeners to honk their car horns in unison, resulting in the most clangorous clamor imaginable. When the police asked him to desist, he relayed that request on the air, instructing listeners *not* to blow their horns in unison at a certain time. Cacophony once again ensued.

It was Phillips, among the DJs pioneering the new music, who was in the right place at the right time to launch Rock and Roll's biggest star. Among his fans was a high

school student named Elvis Presley, who had absorbed, sponge-like, the various currents of R&B, blues, country, gospel and pop that flowed through Memphis and, in July 1954, had fused some of them into a taut, dynamic version of bluesman Arthur Crudup's "That's All Right, Mama," recorded for local record kingpin Sam Phillips. Though no relation to Dewey, Sam Phillips was a good friend, and, excited about the Elvis recording, invited the DJ down to Sun Studios to hear it.

After an initial noncommittal response, Dewey Phillips asked for a couple of acetates the next morning -- the record had not been released yet -- and played the song on his July 8 show … over and over (accounts differ as to exactly how many times). Listeners responded quickly, and, according to Peter Guralnick's *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley*, Phillips called up Elvis' house, was told by his mother that Elvis was at the movies, and said, "Mrs. Presley, you just get that cotton-pickin' son of yours down here to the station. I played that record of his, and them birdbrain phones haven't stopped ringing since."

Elvis was duly rounded up by his parents and dispatched to WHBQ, where Phillips, noting the teenager's nervousness, conducted a casual conversation with the microphone open, establishing the crucial point that Elvis attended Humes, a white high school in then-segregated Memphis, to establish his racial identity for confused listeners. After he'd finished, Dewey thanked Elvis, who naturally asked if he was going to be interviewed, and was told, "I already have." Thus Elvis' storied career was kick-started, and he and Phillips maintained a strong, though tempestuous, friendship for years to come.

When Elvis and rock's other fellow founding fathers – Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Bill Haley, et al. – exploded in 1955-56, a new brand of radio ideally suited to saturating the airwaves with big-beat music as taking over. The traditional block formats, which juxtaposed a trainwreck variety of musical styles, had slowly been mutating into more cohesive musical formats. Stations were prospering by formatting lineups of similar musical programs, rather than following a couple of hours of big-band music with a Rock and Roll show. In 1955, a more streamlined structure for effectively programming a format developed.

Credit for the invention of Top 40 radio generally goes to KOWH/Omaha owner Todd Storz, with a charming accompanying legend that says after sitting in a restaurant for a few hours and hearing one song being repeatedly played on the jukebox, he was inspired to devise a station that would pound the top hits over and over. It seems that after the crowd dispersed and the jukebox ran out of coins, a waitress punched in her own choice – the same song she'd heard countless times all

day. It's likely apocryphal that the eureka moment when radio discovered that the general public wanted to hear its favorite songs again and again truly sprang from such a randomly apropos circumstance. After all, countdown shows featuring 20 or 40 hits already existed, including one launched by Storz. But the idea of adapting a tight playlist of popular songs throughout the day was irresistible. It proved hugely successful, via early adoptions by Storz's stations in New Orleans, Minneapolis and elsewhere, and other pioneering launches from the likes of Texas programming legend Gordon McLendon, who added the crucial wrinkle of highly publicized, buzz-producing contests and promotions.)

The early Top 40 stations played the hits of the day. And when the hits of the day started shifting from Doris Day's "Secret Love" and the Four Aces' "Three Coins in the Fountain" to Haley's "Rock Around the Clock" and Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel," the commercially minded station operators had little problem accommodating the shift, especially when ratings soared even higher as teens flocked to radio's curators of rock.

Freed at Last: The King Reigns in NYC

> *"This is WINS, 10-10 on your dial, the Home of the Big Beat in America. Yours truly, Alan Freed, the old King of Rock 'n' Rollers. Rock and Roll Party Time continues with Johnny Sparrow on label X and a great one for dancing, 'Sparrow's Nest.' " – March 1955, WINS/New York*

By the end of 1954, Alan Freed had hit the big time. Established in America's media hub drawing big ratings playing music that was on the brink of a mass detonation, he was ready to make the most out of an ideal position. About the only sour note (apart from a widely ignored protest by local black DJs who felt he was stifling their opportunities and exploiting their rightful music) was the loss of his cherished Moondog appellation, owing to legal action from the musician of the same sobriquet, who was able to validate an earlier claim to the name. Promptly styling himself the King of Rock and Roll (or similar variations), Freed pounded the phone books, sent out the dedications, played the Rock and Roll records (in large part the R&B he'd been playing for years, renamed), and nearly always mentioned the record label along with the artist and title.

That conscientious crediting trait no doubt endeared him to the legions of record promoters who swarmed the WINS studios and nearby watering holes, but not nearly so much as the prospect of what airplay on Freed's show could do for their wares. Freed received cash, material gifts and songwriting credits from grateful

publishers and record companies, continuing a trend begun back in Cleveland. There he had been listed as a co-writer of "Sincerely" by the Moonglows, a group with whom he worked closely. His New York credits included "co-writing" "Maybellene," the first hit by Chuck Berry, a wholly self-sufficient artist who never required collaborators. Berry's debut received plenty of airplay from Freed, as did subsequent releases on which Freed received no co-writing credit.

Many of the gifts, monetary and otherwise, bestowed upon Freed arose out of after-the-fact gratitude. When Freed played a record frequently, his large record-buying audience and prestigious position (if he placed his imprimatur on a disc, other DJs became more inclined to follow suit) went a long way toward making it a hit. A sheaf of bills or a diamond ring served as both a thank-you and a reminder to strongly consider the gift-giver on the next record. Sometimes no gratuity was needed; friendly relationships, which in New York's small community of radio jocks and promoters developed naturally, accomplished the goal of getting a record played. Whatever the inducements, Freed was a magnet for the promotion corps, according to longtime music-business figure Bob Rolontz in a posthumous appreciation of Freed in the trade publication *Music Business*, "wined and dined like an ancient doyen, courted and conned and looked to for a nod, a smile, or a hello."

Once in New York at WINS, Freed quickly ventured into concert promotion again (in conjunction with notoriously mob-connected label and nightclub owner Morris Levy), staging a series of wildly successful shows at the Paramount Theatre in Brooklyn and expanding into national "Rock and Roll Party" tours. He appeared in five quickie films co-starring top recording stars such as Chuck Berry, Bill Haley, the Platters and Little Richard, including 1957's *Mr. Rock 'n' Roll*, a sort of biopic in which he played himself as a convert to the titular music after a Cleveland record store owner showed him a passel of white teenagers dancing to R&B records.

WINS, which had offered the sort of programmatic mishmash that radio chroniclers call a "variety" format, converted to Top 40 in September 1957. But even after the shift, Freed was not subject to the new programming restrictions; he still played what he liked and presented it however he liked. His New York shows were similar to his Cleveland programs, more reined-in, a bit more formulaic, but he still sang along with records and dropped in the occasional one-liner.

From another angle, Freed may have amped down his approach from sheer exhaustion, having run himself ragged between his show, his concert promotions (involving long hours of toil backstage and, as emcee, onstage), his movie work, the

syndicated radio show "Camel Rock and Roll Party," a "Rock and Roll Dance Party" program for the Armed Forces, and – for four week in the summer of 1957 -- a TV series, "The Big Beat." The television show received high ratings, but was scuttled by ABC after black teenage singer Frankie Lymon was seen dancing with a white girl. The network was also, apparently, put off by Freed's ebullient manner and had a local Philadelphia dance show called "American Bandstand," hosted by the smoother Dick Clark, waiting in the wings.

Then, after Rock and Roll's first flowering, with Freed sitting on top of the world, that world started, as it inevitably does in any heroic saga, to crumble. A May 1958 concert in Boston, a city which had banned Rock and Roll shows the previous year and where audience members and police had clashed at a Freed-promoted show in 1956, turned into a shambles. The crowd started dancing in the aisles and rushing the stage during Jerry Lee Lewis' spot, and Freed had to stop the show to urge the celebrants to return to their seats. When Chuck Berry came on to close the show, much of the crowd left their seats again, the police turned up the house lights, Freed protested, and a ruckus – gang-related, according to some accounts – erupted. Newspaper headlines screamed "RIOT," and Freed was charged with inciting one. Eventually, he was allowed to plead "no contest" and the matter was dropped, but damage had been done. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover weighed in with a statement about Rock and Roll's "corrupting influence on America's youth." Freed was fired from WINS days after the Boston show, but promptly landed a four-hour evening show at crosstown WABC, plus a local daily TV complement, titled "Alan Freed's Big Beat."

But the fatal blow came in 1959 from outside the cozy radio-and-records axis. The widespread custom of slipping a DJ cash, merchandise, or other favors in exchange for airplay or the promise of the same was known in the industry as payola. The term was coined by *Variety* in 1916, 25 years before it cited "disc jockeys" in print and a few years, in fact, before commercial radio began – the publication was referring to payments made by publishers to performers to induce them to sing their songs. It was not a federal crime – and not unlike prevailing practices in other areas of commerce (prominent supermarket displays of cereal brands weren't always awarded strictly on merit). But payola was to become much more notorious, largely because the popularity of Rock and Roll was scoring a direct hit on the wallets of certain segments of the music industry – one in particular.

The American Society of Composers, Artists and Publishers (ASCAP) had been the nation's reigning song-licensing organization for decades. But since the early '40s, it had been locked in a bitter feud with upstart rival Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI).

BMI was started by radio broadcasters to combat what they considered exorbitant ASCAP radio airplay licensing fees. Since ASCAP had locked up the cream of the Tin Pan Alley and Broadway composers and lyricists, BMI recruited members from out of the mainstream, the songwriters of hillbilly music and blues, for instance. A big reason for the development of country and R&B formats on radio was that it was cheaper for stations to play mostly BMI-licensed music, which included a lot more country and R&B and a lot less mainstream pop.

ASCAP viewed BMI with disdain and alarm – helping to foment newspaper controversies about "smutty" R&B records in 1954 -- but became even more upset when Top 40 radio became the dominant radio format in the mid-'50s and started playing more Rock and Roll. As a spinoff of country and R&B, the new musical phenomenon gravitated toward BMI, which was easier to join and exhibited a more welcoming attitude toward practitioners of such vulgar forms. Airplay for standards, show tunes and pop novelties, the core of ASCAP's licensed material, declined sharply.

ASCAP officials and their allies at some major record labels continued to sneer at this unfathomably successful Rock and Roll stuff, but, clearly, that tactic wasn't going to derail the mystery train that seemed unstoppably on track to take over popular music. In 1959, however, with an election year coming up, it wasn't difficult to enlist state and federal lawmakers to focus on the rampant payola situation – after all, the argument went, would such musical trash ever become popular if radio jocks were not being paid to play it?

Congress, never slow at sniffing out headline-generating issues, had just concluded attention-grabbing hearings on scandals involving TV quiz shows providing contestants with answers. The lawmakers promptly set hearings on payola in 1960 and summoned some of the top DJs to justify their standards and practices. Radio companies, especially gigantic ones like WABC owner ABC, panicked.

Now, because of his position at the center of the media world that brought him so much glory and so many money-making opportunities, Freed became a prime target. As the highly visible dean of DJs, the Pied Piper who lured all the gullible children away from sensible tunes to hedonistic rock 'n' roll, with its celebrations of crime, immorality and heavy petting and even more ominous integrationist implications, Freed was one of the House Subcommittee on Legislative Oversight's two main targets. The other was Dick Clark, another ABC employee, who hosted rock's primary television showcase, "American Bandstand."

Both Freed and Clark had entanglements with the music business – the cash Freed received for airplay or low-billed spots on his concert packages, and his songwriting credits and publishing interests. Clark had extensive label and publishing interests of his own.

At the time, Freed was already in corporate hot water; his ratings were down and he regularly aired records before they had been cleared for broadcast. In February 1959 he was nearly fired, but instead signed a new contract after agreeing to return three-fourths of his $40,000 salary in exchange for station support of his stage shows. But in late '59, after word of the impending hearings had spread, he (along with most other ABC DJs and hosts) was asked to sign an "affidavit" requesting disclosure on any music-related financial interests and payments received for playing records.

Clark had to deal with an ABC corporate oath as well, a new policy requiring programmers, DJs and TV hosts to divest their music-related financial interests. Clark agreed to do so, stated he'd done nothing illegal, and was promptly returned to ABC's good graces. Freed demanded an affidavit similar to the customized statement Clark's attorneys had drawn up with ABC's consent, defining pay-for-play more narrowly, but ABC insisted Freed sign the standard model. Freed, feeling if he signed he would perjure himself, refused, and he was fired in November 1959. He did sign a much vaguer affidavit in an attempt to retain his TV show, but he was at the center of the storm, and the show was dropped that same month.

The contrasts between Freed and Clark in their dealings with Congress, where they appeared in April 1960, could hardly have been starker. On the stand before the subcommittee, Clark was a cooperative, deferential witness, while Freed veered between defiance and obsequiousness, in the process contradicting himself, sniping at Clark, and admitting to accepting non-cash gifts, as well as regular payments for "consultation" work. Clark, having divested himself of his outside interests to preserve his "Bandstand" franchise, emerged unscathed, even attracting some Congressional praise for his upstanding, go-getting entrepreneurial traits. Freed was tarred for life as payola's poster child.

As if that weren't enough, the state of New York, where payola practices actually were illegal by virtue of a 1909 law covering gifts with intent to influence, had launched its own probe toward the end of 1959. Freed was targeted, along with a cluster of his crosstown rivals, including Dr. Jive. This proceeding dragged on for some months, finally resulting in Freed's arrest in New York in May 1960 for commercial bribery (accepting $10,000 from Morris Levy's Roulette label in 1958). He was not tried until December 1962, long after other jocks' cases had been

resolved and resultant fallout had settled. A leading Freed competitor, WMGM/New York's Peter Tripp, moved to KYA in San Francisco (along with a prominent WIBG/Philadelphia jock named Tom Donahue, who thought it prudent to transfer his professional activities to a market more removed from the epicenter of controversy). Tripp was eventually convicted in 1961 on 35 counts of commercial bribery, and was ultimately fined $500 and a six-month suspended sentence. Freed pleaded guilty on two counts and received a similar penalty.

For Freed, the upshot was catastrophic. In May 1960, he made a high-profile move to afternoons at Los Angeles' KDAY, starting well but exiting when the station wouldn't let him promote concerts. He next surfaced on the air at WQAM in Miami, where he lasted not quite three months. Never averse to a drink or several, he became increasingly erratic on the air and depressed off it. A New York comeback was discussed but never materialized, he was indicted for tax evasion in 1964, and he died in 1965, essentially from consequences of his 1953 auto accident and subsequent continued drinking, in Palm Springs, Calif. He was 43.

Hancock and Phillips in Decline

Hunter Hancock had an unpleasant, though certainly less severe, brush with the payola scandal as well, being placed on probation in 1962 for failing to report $18,000 in income received between 1956 and 1957. It was a minor glitch in a generally smooth-running career. He parlayed his radio popularity at KFVD, which changed call letters to KPOP in 1955, into a Friday-night TV show called "Rhythm & Bluesville" on Los Angeles CBS affiliate KCBS-TV, although it ran for just 17 weeks. His run on L.A. R&B station KGFJ, which began as a late-evening adjunct to his show on KPOP, lasted considerably longer, from 1956 until he was let go in 1968. His tenure at KPOP came to an end in 1960, when the station switched to a country format.

Hancock also formed a briefly successful record label, Swingin', in 1959, scoring sizable hits with Big Jay McNeely's "There Is Something on Your Mind" and Rochell & The Candles' "Once Upon a Time." He started a Sunday gospel show on L.A.'s KGER in 1957., After exiting KGFJ, he worked in public relations, although he did re-create his DJ act for the *Cruisin'* radio anthology series in the '70s. He died in 2004 at the age of 88. His quarter-century on Los Angeles radio spanned the block-programming era to R&B's modern age, which he helped establish by popularizing black music in Southern California and (through syndication) across the country. He chose not to make the crossover into Rock and Roll radio, staying loyal to his devoted black audience. Few white disc jockeys were as popular and

influential in the R&B field.

Dewey Phillips was unscarred by the payola scare, but as the ‘50s wore on his life and career went far from smoothly. Like Freed, Phillips suffered from automotive misadventure – he had two big car wrecks in the ‘50s, after one of which he did his show from his hospital bed. His 1956 WHBQ-TV venture, “The Pop Shop,” which at times was simulcast on his radio show, was initially successful. But when WHBQ (the radio station) adopted a more restrictive Top 40 format in 1958, the station’s resident wild man was dismissed, a victim of the format he helped pave the way for. On later airchecks from lesser Memphis stations, Phillips sounded distracted, dispirited and even less intelligible than in his prime, and he died in 1968 at 42.

Top 40 Rules the Radio Roost

Although DJs such as Phillips and Freed crashed from the mountaintop, Rock and Roll radio flourished despite the efforts of ASCAP and the other payola-era crusaders. The first generation of rockers took a massive hit when Elvis joined the army, Little Richard entered the ministry, Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper died in a plane crash, Chuck Berry was imprisoned for transporting a 14-year-old girl across state lines for prostitution purposes, and Jerry Lee Lewis married his young teenaged cousin.

The immediate fallout was a slump in 1959-60, when pretty-boy pin-ups such as Paul Anka and Fabian dominated playlists lacking Rock and Roll content, more from lack of supply than demand. But the remainder of the pre-Beatles era (up to 1964) – contrary to tenacious myth – teemed with dynamic music:

--Rock instrumentals from Link Wray, Duane Eddy, Booker T & the M.G.s and scores of unsung combos

--Girl-group classics by the Shirelles, the Chiffons, the Angels and Phil Spector’s troupes (Crystals, Ronettes, Darlene Love)

--Vital R&B from Chicago (Gene Chandler, Betty Everett, Curtis Mayfield and Jerry Butler), uptown New York (Ben E. King and the Drifters, Garnet Mimms, Chuck Jackson), Norfolk (Gary U.S. Bonds, Jimmy Soul), Memphis (Rufus and Carla Thomas, Otis Redding), and the new Motown combine from Detroit, which kicked off a long reign with the Miracles, Mary Wells and the Marvelettes

--Surf vocals from the Beach Boys and Jan & Dean, and instrumentals from the

more ephemeral Surfaris, Chantays and Astronauts

--Power-packed ballads and rockers from solo stars such as Roy Orbison, Del Shannon, Gene Pitney and the protean Dion

--and even a neo-doo-wop revival that spawned dazzling vocal combos led by the Four Seasons.

Radio remained the main conduit for exposing this colorful array of music, and its disseminators, the DJs, matched the music in variety and style. As with the first generation of R&B pioneers, each municipality had its cherished legends, many of whom deserve more space than can be devoted to them here.

Cleveland, previously blessed with Freed and Bill Randle, was treated to the astonishing rhymed patter of the “Mad Daddy” Pete Myers, who followed Freed’s career path and hit in New York, although failing to match the Moondog’s lofty heights. The competition was tough in the big city; among the wildest were jazz jock-turned-lightning-fast word-spewer B. Mitchel Reed (BMR for short) and jive-talking, peerless self-promoter Murray “The K” Kaufman.

Hy Lit, Joe Niagara and Jerry “The Geator With the Heater” Blavat enthralled Philadelphia. Motormouth Dick Biondi dazzled Chicago; Joey Reynolds was Buffalo’s reigning wise guy; Arnie “Woo Woo” Ginsberg wailed in Boston. Russ “Weird Beard” Knight flipped out Dallas.

The Top 40 format, still in its youth, was hospitable to the eccentricity of the top jocks, allowing them wide latitude in what they could play and say. But that freedom was not destined to last forever.

Top 40 Tightens Up

“Your Big Daddy, Tom Donahue, and this is what I do every day, for you, at you, and y’know, until 4 o’clock.” – 1961, KYA/San Francisco

Tom Donahue had been on the air since 1949 at WTIP in Charleston, S.C., and starting in ~~since~~ 1951was a massively popular DJ at Philadelphia’s WIBG for 10 years, hosting his “Danceland” show. (WIBG did not formally become a top 40 station until 1958.) He came to KYA in 1961, shortly thereafter being joined by a young DJ and programmer named Bill Drake (Philip Yarbrough at birth). Drake had some radical ideas regarding the top 40 format, ideas that were also gaining sway in

New York via programmers Rick Sklar and Mike Joseph and in Los Angeles with Chuck Blore.

Early Top 40 stations belied their name by playing far more than 40 records -- 60, 75, even 100 current records, plus oldies and extras (new tunes receiving on-air tryouts). Drake and the new-breed programmers slashed playlists drastically. More significantly, breaks (the time between records and prerecorded commercials during which the art of the DJ was practiced) were trimmed and more tightly organized, with liner cards dictating how record intros and outros and station promotions and contests were to be announced. Jingles and slogans were interspersed through the breaks, and the overall structure of shows -- including which records were to be played at which times -- was determined via complex hour-long “clocks.”

What came to be known as the Drake format was altogether a tighter style of radio, but the changes evolved gradually. At KYA, Donahue and such admirable compatriots as Bobby Mitchell, Peter Tripp and “Emperor” Bob Hudson (later a star in L.A.) were able to inject a considerable degree of personality even within their shorter breaks. Intoned in his inimitably dry, mellow yet entirely authoritative bass tones, Donahue’s customary intro, “Big Daddy, here to blow your mind and clean up your face,” was hipness personified. And he could be addictively droll in a few spare words –such as this back-announce for Hank Ballard & The Midnighters’ pre-Chubby Checker original of “The Twist”: “This is the way it all began, with Hank Ballard and the original ‘Twist.’ Now of the 300 or so records we receive every week, I’d guess 250 of them are Twist. Most of them … b-a-a-a-d.” Or even more succinctly, “Gary Bonds, another of the teenage millionaires, with ‘Dear Lady Twist.’ ”

Although Donahue and Drake got along well personally, Drake’s formatic restrictions must have chafed Donahue, accustomed to a more freewheeling brand of radio. Donahue would continue in Top 40 until 1965, however, then diversify into other musical ventures and return in 1967 with something new.

The Beatles Shake It Up (Baby)

In 1964, meanwhile, a music scene already bursting with vitality was assaulted by an invasive epidemic of bands from Britain, led, of course, by the Beatles. The four Liverpudlians had a profound long-range effect on rock radio, but in the short run they provided the perfect pretext for Top 40 to crank up the promotional dial past 11 with nonstop contests, games and battles for exclusive, unheard-in-America Beatles music, and for deejays to transform themselves into obsessive stalkers, reporting

every move the Beatles made. Every station tried to finagle an emcee slot on the local Beatles concert or, better yet, a spot on one of the three national tours, and each lucky or enterprising jock who did so proclaimed his unique tightness with the Fab Four. KRLA/Los Angeles jock Dave Hull ("The Hullabalooer") got right in there, partly owing to the considerable amount of time the Beatles spent in the music business's West Coast epicenter. WFUN/Miami newsman Larry Kane covered the tours intensively and later spun off a pair of books on the subject.

But radio's pre-eminent 'fifth Beatle" was Murray the K, the DJ who had replaced Alan Freed at WINS and who inserted himself in the Beatles' American existence from the moment of their first press conference in New York. Murray escorted the band to the trendy nightclub The Peppermint Lounge, roomed with George Harrison in Miami, and exploited his access to the group by soliciting and recording dozens of "drop-ins," mini-quotes he could drop in to a between-records spiel, usually consisting of one or more of the Beatles declaiming Murray's slogan, "You're what's happening, baby!" Or instead, as delectably described by Tom Wolfe in his 1964 piece "The Fifth Beatle," Murray and a Fab would engage in a spirited simulated debate over who was more happening that would culminate, inevitably, in their concluding that they both were what's happening, baby.

Top 40 radio also reveled in propelling a varied and mostly wondrous swath of British competitors – the Dave Clark Five, the Rolling Stones, the Searchers, Herman's Hermits, the Animals, Gerry & The Pacemakers – into the mainstream. But the British Invasion also spun off a couple of more far-reaching effects:

First, so fervid was the appetite for Beatles music that stations broke format by delving far beyond the latest Capitol-promoted single to play album cuts, British-released tracks that hadn't yet appeared in the States, and even a murky live recording or two. This was virtually unheard-of; Top 40 music was based on playing the latest single by an artist (three minutes in duration or less), and maybe a few earlier hits by the big stars. And listeners, especially other musicians, started noticing these album tracks by the Beatles were good, and were mostly written by the Beatles themselves. Most of the other British groups, with the notable exception of the Dave Clark Five, relied on compositions by professional songwriters at first, the way American pop music had generally gone about its business. But the Beatles' originality struck a chord or three with American bands.

Among the first to respond with an original hit ("Laugh, Laugh"), in fall 1964, were the Beau Brummels, a San Francisco band recording for Tom Donahue's new Autumn label. The following spring, the Byrds transformed Bob Dylan's dizzying

verbal gymnastics into sparkling folk-rock, and Dylan ditched the folk acoustics to go flat-out rock himself (shattering radio's self-imposed three-minute barrier with breakthrough hit "Like a Rolling Stone"), and the deluge began. Scores of British and American artists wrote their own singles and filled albums with original songs, and the good ones had plenty of album tracks that were as strong as the singles their labels chose for radio to play.

Except that radio, always excepting Beatles material, didn't bite. The grip of formatic tradition was too strong: Presented with a wealth of glorious, groundbreaking music, Top 40 stations still played only the hits. And fewer of them at that.

Bill Drake, wandering from gig to gig as a typical radio nomad, had landed the programming job at KYNO in Fresno, Calif. Here he refined the tighter Top 40 structural experiments he'd introduced at KYA. He devised "Boss Radio," an ultra-tight format that aimed to waste not a single second in unbridled idle DJ chatter and further, restricted playlists to a "Boss 30" (plus a few new "extras"). Through his radio consulting firm, Drake-Chenault, he spread the format, achieving huge ratings and publicity in the bigger markets of San Francisco (KFRC) and the second-most important radio locale, Los Angeles, at KHJ. Drake's format became the primary model for Top 40 in an era of unprecedentedly fierce competition.

The Beatles and other British Invaders and the consequent American counterattack made pop music even more of a generational touchstone than it had been since the mid-'50s, and radio stations battled ferociously for the teenage attention span. The tightly formatted Drake stations in the RKO chain (soon including CKLW/Windsor, Canada, serving Detroit, and Dewey Phillips' old home, WHBQ/Memphis) and their clones across the country generally dealt severe or fatal ratings blows to their competitors, usually administered more loosely, playing more records – therefore, according to still-operative radio theory, increasing the chances of turning off listeners – and allowing DJs more latitude to talk …or ramble, as the Drake acolytes would have it.

One of Drake's less-noticed tenets was encouraging his jocks to retain individual, sometimes wild, personalities and images, but to learn to contain the color within a short break. DJs such as The Real Don Steele and Robert W. Morgan at KHJ were masters at this challenging art. But many of Drake's imitators merely absorbed the "keep it tight" portion of the Boss Radio philosophy and forewent the personality aspect, making for dull, cookie-cutter radio. Even in these cases, the discipline of the formula was generally enough to defeat the outdated-sounding competition, but

much of radio's magic and excitement was lost.

Free Form: Personality Radio Raises the Stakes

A few of Boss Radio's beleaguered victims fought back by taking the opposite tack and further loosening the restrictions of the Top 40 format. Although not uniquely, this battle scenario played out most prominently in the top radio markets, Los Angeles and New York.

Assaulted by Drake's KHJ, L.A.'s other Top 40 outlets, KRLA, KFWB and newcomer KBLA, all evolved toward playing more album cuts and eclectic music. KBLA's standout jock was Dave Diamond, whose verbose delivery had clashed with KHJ's concise break intervals but who found his ideal environment in evenings at the experimental KBLA. Diamond, attuned to the psychedelic mumble-jumble that was infecting American hip-speak from late 1965 onward, would at great length and with apparent spontaneity reel off endless monologs about "the sanctuary of the ruby-red-lipped lizard" and posing the existential question, "Are we in the garden of man-eating dandelions or in the safety of the Tasmanian treehouse?"

At KFWB, where B. Mitchel Reed, the self-proclaimed (and, in actuality, undoubted) "fastest tongue in the West" had migrated from New York twice – first in the early '60s and again, for good, in 1965 -- an even more drastic evolution took place in 1967. KBLA switched to a country format that year, and KFWB picked up Diamond's "The Diamond Mine," but it was Reed who personified the new approach – he would play mélanges of album cuts from the known (Beatles, Stones) to the subterranean (Clear Light), rapping in a slightly mellower but still faintly dizzying hipster style about lending a few bucks to an impecunious "Stevie" Stills and playing up his insider status within L.A.'s ultra-hip showbiz elite. A fascinating if unsung radio experiment, this "free-form" approach was short-lived, perishing when KFWB switched to all-news in 1968. But it was a key moment as things moved toward the next development in Rock and Roll radio.

A tangentially influential early free-form experiment in the R&B vein also had a strong impact in L.A. Wolfman Jack [Bob Smith], a white Brooklynite who served as a go-fer at Alan Freed concerts, started broadcasting gutbucket blues and obscure R&B from XERF across the Mexican border from Del Rio, Texas, in 1964, following a long border-radio huckster tradition. XERF and a few other Mexican border stations – like the old block-format stations of the '30s and '40s -- were open to pretty much anyone with a few bucks and a vague program plan, and possessed

the further attraction of anywhere from triple to tenfold the power allowed even the biggest clear-channel U.S. AM stations. In 1965 the Wolfman switched his show to XERB in Tijuana, so as to blanket L.A. (not to mention San Diego, San Francisco, and many West Coast locales between and beyond) with an only slightly more polished version of his XERF musical blend, punctuated by lupine howls, risqué humor, and a succession of ads for dodgy products conveniently payable by, as the Wolfman seemed to put it, "cash, check or money odor."

What a Concept: Rock on FM

In New York in 1965, Murray the K's station, WINS –owned by the same company, Westinghouse, as KFWB -- was a casualty in a bitter three-pronged Top 40 battle, switching to all-news and abandoning the field to the WMCA "Good Guys" and the WABC "All-Americans," as the respective DJ lineups were hyped. Both stations were ultra-tight musically, particularly WABC, a pioneer in the short-playlist field.

Meanwhile, RKO, having achieved huge success by introducing Boss Radio on many of its AM stations, decided to try another innovation on its New York FM property, WOR-FM, since WOR-AM was already successful with a blend of talk and musical standards. FM had been radio's orphan from its commercial introduction in 1941 – car radios and transistors often offered only the AM band, and operators concentrated on their powerful flagship AMs. FM was a sanctuary for classical music, various forms of ethnic programming or replications of the programming of co-owned AM stations (known as "simulcasts").

All that changed in 1965, when the FCC mandated that simulcasts in markets larger than 100,000 people be restricted to just 50 % of FM stations' programming. Suddenly FM station owners had to scramble to fill at least half of the broadcast day., RKO's idea was an earlier and, at first, more radical version of L.A.'s musical liberalism – a free-form approach (one that had been experimented with on a few college FM stations), heavy on the album cuts and hip hit singles of the day, with former New York Top 40 DJ stars such as Scott Muni and the ever-resilient Murray the K taking the lead.

Instituted in mid-1966, the new WOR-FM approach jolted New York radio into the hippie era and aired adventurous album tracks in the increasingly popular stereo format that FM had offered since 1961 and AM was unable to provide. But it didn't last. Although there are those (generally New Yorkers, of course) who consider WOR-FM radio's high point, RKO pulled the plug on the format in October 1967, replacing it with – as you'd expect – a version of its mega-successful Boss Radio

format. But the WOR-FM experiment paved the way for a more lasting radio revolution, born of the second great confluence of technology (stereo), opportunity (the neglected FM radio band) and cultural ferment, and igniting in San Francisco.

Counter-Culture Programming: The Rise of FM Rock

"That's all for tonight ... and that's the way it was, and that's the way it is, and it's always changing and it's always the same. How's that for psychedelic?" – Tom Donahue, 1968, KSAN/San Francisco

Tom Donahue had left radio in 1965 to pursue his widespread other interests, some of which were musical. Autumn Records, the San Francisco-based label he had founded with fellow KYA DJ Bobby Mitchell, scored four straight national hits with the Beau Brummels. These were produced by a popular local R&B DJ christened Sylvester Stewart but better known as Sly Stone, who had been mixing rock into his shows. shows at KDIA and KSOL. Donahue also published *Tempo*, one of several "tip sheets" that noted regional hits and "tipped" new records for success (not always an absolutely impartial process at some publications), and produced the last live Beatles concert, 1966's tour closer at San Francisco's Candlestick Park.

Still, in November 1967 he remained irritated enough by the Top 40 radio milieu in which he had flourished for 16 years to write an article for the second issue of new San Francisco-based counter-cultural rock magazine *Rolling Stone* entitled "AM Radio Is Dead and Its Rotting Corpse Is Stinking Up the Airwaves."

Wrote Donahue, adopting a tone every bit as conciliatory and diplomatic as the article's title, "The disc jockeys have become robots, performing their inanities at the direction of programmers who have succeeded in totally squeezing the human element out of their sound, and reducing it to a series of blips and bleeps and happy, oh yes, always happy-sounding cretins who are poured from bottles every three hours. They have succeeded in making everyone on the station staff sound the same -- asinine."

Not only was Donahue preaching to the choir – *Rolling Stone*'s as-yet-small and highly homogenous readership was all about taking music seriously (that meant albums, not singles) and disdaining plasticity in all its countless cultural forms – but he was already in competition with the AM radio moguls. Earlier that year, in April, he had launched a free-form album-rock format at struggling San Francisco FM station KMPX,, known until 1962 as, improbably, KHIP.

KMPX, like so many AM stations of the pre-rock past and FM stations of the '60s, had been selling programming blocks to all comers, resulting in a lineup dominated by foreign-language shows. Donahue, after his proposal for a show featuring album tracks was turned down by his alma mater, KYA, and after turning down airshift offers from KSOL and KDIA, offered KMPX an album-rock show from 8pm-midnight, with the idea of adding further blocks of similar programs. Interestingly, one of KMPX's program blocks, the overnight show hosted by a musician/DJ named Larry Miller, already (dating from two months before Donahue's approach) played folk, rock and jazz album tracks, making Miller the unheralded forefather of free-form radio in the Bay Area. But it was Donahue who made the format work.

Donahue's casual yet magisterial tones were made for free-form, which he developed from sessions at his home in which he'd play his favorite tracks for friends. Adopting a similar style for the KMPX public's delectation, the former Big Daddy from KYA became the hippie underground's avuncular authority figure. He retained his dignity even when spouting the jargon of the era – although much more period nonsense was heard, on the commercials, public service announcements and even newscasts that accompanied his shows.

KMPX, as we've seen, was hardly the only radio station to adopt the freewheeling album-tracks approach, but the time and place were ideal. It hit the air just in time to provide the soundtrack for San Francisco's media-hyped "Summer of Love" in 1967, when the counter-culture emerged in all its exploitable glory. The Bay Area was ground zero for the hippie lifestyle and the music that fueled it, by the likes of Jefferson Airplane (whose singer Grace Slick first recorded for Donahue's Autumn label), the Grateful Dead (who failed an Autumn audition), Big Brother & the Holding Company, Country Joe & the Fish, and all the other names emblazoned in stylized hallucinogenic types on antique Fillmore and Avalon ballroom posters. Just as New York was the epicenter for the first rock revolution and the coronation of Alan Freed, San Francisco was the natural destination for the sensation-seeking media, and KMPX and Donahue were beneficiaries.

Donahue and associates started a similar format at KPPC in Pasadena, Calif., near Los Angeles, in November 1967; among the jocks was B. Mitchel Reed. The free-form radio revolution quickly metastasized. WOR-FM's format, and some of its DJs, were snapped up by New York competitor WNEW-FM in October 1967, Boston's WBCN followed suit in early 1968. By the end of the following year, few major markets were without an FM outlet where you could hear the 11-minute version of "Time Has Come Today" by the Chambers Brothers or the even longer and more torturous "In-a-Gadda-da-Vida" by Iron Butterfly (suitable duration for a

DJ to visit the head, feed his head or head for the snack machine).

KMPX was not one of these legacy stations. Donahue was splitting time between KMPX and his KPPC enterprise, and when requested by KMPX's owner in March 1968 to choose between the gigs, decided to forsake KMPX. His staffers walked out in a sympathy strike, KMPX hired replacements (including, as programmer, recently fired DJ Larry Miller), and in May, Donahue & company moved to crosstown KSAN, part of the large Metromedia chain, ultimately achieving more substantial success.

KPPC didn't endure for the long run either. Reed, with help from Donahue, jumped to KSAN's L.A. sister station, KMET, and –sounding mellower than ever, the slightly less authoritative but equally avuncular L.A. analogue of Donahue -- anchored a new and far better-rated album-rock format. KPPC, handicapped by a poor signal, struggled on until 1971.

Donahue himself wasn't long for the world –his "Big Daddy" nickname was not so much affectation as euphemism for his substantially overweight physique, and he died at 46 in 1975 from a heart attack. He did live long enough to see his cherished free-form approach commodified by ever-opportunistic radio execs – chiefly those at the ABC chain – into what became in the '70s AOR (Album-Oriented Rock). The freewheeling sonic anarchy of KMPX and its compatriots, in which DJs regained the power they had lost when Top 40 tightened up and created far-ranging musical blends that mixed self-indulgence and inspiration in varying proportions, gave way to corporate rock radio. The programmers re-assumed control of the music, choosing the songs, generally from the designated "emphasis tracks" picked by the record labels as an album's best commercial representatives. Consulting overseers, who advised stations in many different markets, helped determine the structuring and sometimes the musical content of their clients, thereby diluting free-form's localized variety even further.

Free-form retreated to the shrunken sanctuaries of specialty weekend shows, low-powered college and public radio stations, and the occasional syndicated program. AOR became a leading and influential format, albeit a narrowly targeted approach. Among its other self-imposed limitations, it became virtually lily-white – black musicians, apart from Jimi Hendrix and a handful of others, just didn't fit the rock format. If you've ever been puzzled by why MTV was virtually white-only at its inception, it was because it was modeled not after the always-integrated Top 40 format but after album rock. The video channel's early programming executives came from corporate radio and felt strongly that a tightly focused format – rock, in

this case -- was the ticket to ratings success for the new venture.

Eventually, AOR’s audience splintered with age into those who favored the classics and those who preferred the rock of the ‘80s and the ‘90s. Alternative (or modern rock) stations further fragmented the rock radio realm until, in the mid-‘90s, modern rock and mainstream rock merged into nearly indistinguishable formatic entities. These current rock stations did not sound much like the old AORs or the classic rockers that cherry-picked the biggest rock hits of the ‘70s and ‘80s, but they maintained the tradition of playing very few black musicians. They also granted airplay to very few women – neither class of musician apparently tested well with their target audiences.

Top 40, meanwhile, endured, though in far less colorful and distinctive a form than in the unshackled ‘50s and even the Boss Radio ‘60s. It remained successful chiefly by staying more or less true to its original mission: playing the hits, no matter their stylistic origin. Still, the format split into “rhythmic” (meaning principally R&B and hip-hop hits) and “mainstream” (i.e., pop hits) variations, spiced with occasional rock and even more occasional country crossover hits.

The wild, improvised kind of radio that the early Rock and Roll radio pioneers introduced, the sort of program where a DJ could insult a sponsor, make fun of management, howl along to a record, play it a dozen times in a row or smash it on-air, is long gone. A crasser, more artificial version of early Rock and Roll radio anarchy exists on the many “Morning Zoo”-type ensemble shows and shock-jock programs that began in the ‘80s, but most “air personalities” (as DJs came to be known in the trade) have been leached of distinctive personality over the decades. The original freewheeling radio spirit survives tenuously, on podcasts, Internet radio programs and a few syndicated shows.

The forefathers themselves lapsed in memory save for occasional reminiscent gestures. Alan Freed was memorialized in yet another loose biopic, 1978’s “American Hot Wax,” and a 1999 USA channel TV bio called “Mr. Rock ‘n’ Roll: The Alan Freed Story,” starring Judd Nelson as Freed, with Paula Abdul also featured. Dewey Phillips is the main source of inspiration for 2009’s Broadway-bound (as of this writing) musical “Memphis”; otherwise, he’s remembered, if at all, as the jock who first played Elvis on the radio. Tom Donahue is still genuflected toward in radio circles as AOR's founding Big Daddy. Hunter Hancock is largely forgotten.

But Rock and Roll never forgets, Bob Seger claimed, and the achievements of these

men and their many under-credited compatriots is worth cherishing forever in memory. Freed, Phillips and Hancock brought the music of a methodically isolated subculture to the masses, and hastened the birth of the ultimate musical hybrid, Rock and Roll. Donahue was there at rock's beginning and later gave the expanding art form the auditory canvas to showcase it in all its glory. Every time a radio listener hears a great song and is moved to follow the music, a subliminal voice in the ether echoes, "Tell 'em Phillips (or Freed, Hancock, or Donahue) sent'cha!"