Cleveland: "Where rock began to roll"?

Brett D. Lashua, Leeds Beckett University

Once a landmark record store in Cleveland, "Record Rendezvous" closed in 1987. Although I lived only a short drive away as a young teenager then, I knew almost nothing about it, or the role it had played in the city's rock 'n' roll past. When, 30 years later, I walked past the former shop at 300 Prospect Avenue, the building stood empty but—having learned a bit more about the city's past—elicited a slight thrill. This record store was perhaps the most important place in Cleveland's musical heritage (Petkovic, 2017), and—perhaps—provides the best explanation why the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum is now sited just a mile away on the shores of Lake Erie. Yet, there's nothing here to mark its importance; this small piece of downtown history remains largely uncommemorated.

Through its focus on Cleveland, Ohio, this chapter asks how 'music cities' make their claims-to-fame. Some cities have become widely recognized sites of popular music heritage based primarily upon the legacy of the musicians who were born, lived, and/or made their fame there (Cohen, Knifton, Leonard and Roberts, 2014). The history of popular music in Cleveland, arguably, presents few spectacular moments or scenes; there wasn't anything particularly unique or 'authentic' about Cleveland's popular music; while there are a few musicians that global audiences might recognize as characteristically from Cleveland, there was no distinctive 'Cleveland sound' as sometimes noted for other cities (Bennett, 2002). Nor was there a singular standout venue that attracted exceptional fame or notoriety, as elsewhere. These absences are dissonant, in terms of geographically underpinning the city's popular music heritage, as noted by Gibson and Connell (2007, p. 168):

> much is made of the 'roots' of music in particular locations, eras and in social 'scenes' – the 'psychedelic' scene of San Francisco in the 1960s, jazz from New Orleans, waltzes from Vienna. Settings for the myths of classical music, rock 'n' roll, hip hop and other styles are made authentic through discussions of the places and people surrounding musical creativity and production.

Other cities were sites of storied performance venues or mythic recording studios (Bennett, 2016): places where 'the magic', if momentary, of popular music making happened (Roberts, 2014). Gibson and Connell (2007) added that other "places become known as authentic sites of musical creativity, where 'musicians came together', and where the 'magic of composition took place'" (p. 168); this doesn't aptly characterize Cleveland either. Although it has produced a number of respected musicians and like many cities has had some venerable venues, Cleveland and its self-authorization as the "place where rock began to roll"[1] represents a different characterization. What underscores Cleveland's assertion to be the "birthplace" of rock 'n' roll, and since 1995, the site of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum? What events marked this "birth" and how were they established as a significant popular music heritage?

This chapter draws from archival research conducted in the summer of 2017 at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame archives to explore a micro-historical case study of the city's popular music heritage. This case is founded, initially, upon the legacy of DJ

Alan Freed (1921-1965) and examines several claims as "firsts": the "first" rock 'n' roll concert—the Moondog Coronation Ball on 21 March 1952—and the invention of the phase "rock 'n' roll". Jackson (1991, p. 1) begins his biography of Freed with an epigraph from DJ and rock historian Norm N. Nite: "If Rock had any particular beginning, it was on March 21, 1952."

Yet, there were other notable "firsts" for popular music in Cleveland and the chapter shifts to other narratives that run along with, and beyond, Freed's tenure and legacy. One is the story of the aforementioned local record store, Record Rendezvous, and its owner Leo Mintz (1911-1976). Although Freed was crowned, and later heavily promoted as both the first "King of Rock 'n' Roll" and "Mister Rock & Roll", Mintz's legacy is of far less renown (although there is now a "Leo Mintz theater" in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame). After recounting the stories of Freed, the Moondog Coronation Ball, Mintz and Record Rendezvous, the chapter revisits the ways in which these legacies were mobilized and mythologized, especially during the 1980s, when Cleveland successfully positioned itself as a both a "city of origin" and a serious contender during the campaign to become the future site of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

(Re)Turning to Cleveland

Having lived abroad for nearly 20 years, my 2017 trip to conduct research in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's library and archives was something of a homecoming for me, as I grew up[2], and frequently performed (as a rock drummer) in and around the Cleveland area. From abroad, Cleveland seems an unlikely and surprising site for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (Sheerin, 2012). Even in Cleveland, its citizens play upon this unlikeliness. In a tourist shop near the city's central Public Square, rows of badges are displayed for sale beside the cash register; some simply have a "C" (the logo of the city's baseball team), some proudly state "CLE" (the city's airport code), or "Cleveland" in the script popularized by the city's basketball team. One badge jests: "I LIKED CLEVELAND BEFORE IT WAS COOL" while another knowingly quips "Cleveland: It's Not That Bad". Sitting on the shores of Lake Erie, for decades the city was derided as "the mistake on the lake", the butt of jokes about declining industry, hard-luck sports teams, decaying infrastructure, and industrial pollution. The city's river, the Cuyahoga, was so heavily polluted that its surface repeatedly caught fire, including a conflagration in 1969 that inspired the Randy Newman song "Burn On" (1972).

Once the 5th largest city in the United States (in the 1920s), in the late 19th and early 20th centuries Cleveland's industrial economy attracted waves of settlement, such as immigrants arriving from southern and eastern Europe, then African-Americans moving north seeking employment. Its population peaked around 1950 just shy of 1 million residents. According to U.S. Census figures (2005), in the 1950s the city's demographics remained overwhelmingly white (83.7%), with an African American population of 16.2%. From the 1960s, with the gradual decline of its heavy industries, civic financial difficulties, poverty and rioting (most notably in Hough, one of the city's oldest neighborhoods and over 95% black, in 1966), and a population shift to its suburbs, the city entered a long period of decline that extended through the 1980s. By 1983, Cleveland had an unemployment rate among the highest in the US (13.8%). With the drop in employment, its population fell too,

to an estimated 500,000 in 1990[3]. Having defaulted on Federal loans in 1978, the city struggled to attract re-investment to its downtown core, much like other cities in the region such as Akron, Detroit, or Buffalo. This wider area of struggling downtowns and shuttered industries came to be characterized as the "Rust Belt". It is against this backdrop that Record Rendezvous ceased trading in 1987, and this contextualization presages the regeneration initiatives that eventually brought the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to Cleveland in 1995. It also establishes the early 1950s—its economic and demographic heyday—as a particularly significant time in the city's history.

Origin(al) myths: The Moondog, and the Moondog Coronation Ball

This section situates a number of "firsts" that Clevelanders claim as part of the city's popular music heritage. In the early 1950s, Cleveland was seen as breakout city for new music (Jackson, 1991); if a record sold there first, it would likely sell elsewhere. Local radio stations also competed to "break" a new record by playing it on the air for the first time. Although the national music markets remained deeply segregated (Roy, 2004), by the early 1950s Clevelanders—primarily those within its 130,000-strong black community—were noting the rising popularity of Rhythm and Blues (R&B). Some were alarmed; Cleveland's *Call & Post*, an African-American newspaper, did not mince words with its view of this new music: "Garbage, trash, a shocking display of gutbucket blues and lowdown rhythms" (in Scott, 1982, p. 11D). Others, such as record promoter and radio DJ Chuck Young, recalled:

> Because of the war, a lot of black people had come to work in the industrial factories of the North, so the music atmosphere changed. A lot of kids who were listening to big band started listening to blues music. It was a very exciting time. […] This was the era that started Cleveland being the rock and roll capital. […] It was a fast area to get a record started. They could get a feel of how big a record would be by the growth in the Cleveland area. Everyone was watching what would happen here because the disc jockeys were adaptive to playing new things. (Halasa, 1990a, p. 9)

While, nationally, a handful of radio DJs were playing R&B "race" records on a few stations, Adams (2002, p. 5) celebrated Alan Freed (1921–1965) as "the first white radio man to do so on the North Coast." Arriving in Cleveland in 1950, Freed began broadcasting on local station WJW in July 1951, hosting a classical program in the evenings followed by a late night slot from 11.15 p.m. to 2 a.m. Due to these moonlit hours, Freed called his late program "The Moondog Show"; he began using as his theme the instrumental track "Moondog's Symphony" (1950) by Louis Hardin[4]. The Moondog Show was sponsored, not coincidentally, by Leo Mintz's Record Rendezvous, and R&B records were its mainstay. The show was an instant hit with listeners.

Building on the rapid success of The Moondog Show and the growing popularity of R&B—rebranded as "rock 'n' roll"—Freed and Mintz organized what some view as the first rock 'n' roll concert, the Moondog Coronation Ball, on 21 March 1952 (Gillett 1970, Jackson 1991, Adams 2002). Capitalizing on Freed's radio popularity, the Moondog Coronation Ball would celebrate rock 'n' roll and crown Freed as the "King of the Moondoggers". Rebelliously advertised as "the most

terrible ball of them all" to appeal to its teenage audience, the concert was set to feature black R&B bands Paul Williams and the Hucklebuckers, Tiny Grimes & the Rockin' Highlanders, The Dominoes (a doo-wop act), Varetta Dillard, Danny Cobb and others. The event was planned for the 9,000-seat Cleveland Arena[5], primarily a sports venue, on Euclid Avenue.

What unfolded on the night was far from the concert envisioned by the event organizers. The first calamity occurred when an estimated 16,000 people turned up. When the music started, the thousands outside rushed the doors to try to get in, and the event quickly spun out of control. Instead of a concert, the event has been characterized by some as a "race riot" as the police and fire departments were called in to disperse the angry, and largely black, crowds (Adams 2002, Burgoyne 2003, Gillett, 1970, Jackson, 1991). The only photographer present, Peter Hastings, took a couple of pictures and hastily left the event, later stating "I can still see the crowd beneath us, getting bigger all the time […]. It was frightening. I took the picture. Then we got out of there as fast as we could" (quoted in Jackson, 1991, p. 112). One WJW station executive, Bill Lemmon, later recalled: "It was madness. I saw knives flashing. People without tickets broke down the doors. We were up there in the press box and couldn't get out for three hours" (Scott, 1982 p. 11D).

The size and excitement of the crowd seems to have caught almost all, including the performers, off guard. In a 1992 interview with Halasa (1992, p.13), saxophonist Paul Williams (1915-2002) described being the first and only act to play the ill-fated Moondog Coronation Ball:

> When we first got on stage, it wasn't bad. It was calm. But the minute we hit the music, the people outside got restless, and they wanted to get in… bad. While we were playing we noticed the doors were 'breathing'. That did it. By the time we finished the song, they had broken the doors and were all in. So we played only one number.

From his center stage vantage point, Williams recounted his view as events swiftly unfolded: "We could see what was going on, because the house lights were still on, they never went down. The audience was fighting up in the balcony and all over the place." With remarkable clarity 40 years later, Williams described the scene:

> Everyone was just trying to get out of there. We started packing right away. While we were packing, on the left of the upper deck, there was this young boy and an old man fighting. Every time the young boy hit this old man, the old man stabbed him. He did it three or four times. […] We just kept packing because there wasn't any shooting, just fighting out in the audience. By then the police were there. They were having a hard time clearing the place. (Halasa, 1992, p. 13)

This concert represents a number of "firsts" then, but perhaps something less noteworthy than the "first rock 'n' roll concert". Williams considered the events peculiar uniqueness:

> You know, we were a hot band then. We played a lot of big halls and places where fights would break out a lot of the time. But, it was the first time we

> saw something like that. They were just destroying the place. (Halasa, 1992, p. 13)

The local press immediately sensationalized the event—"Moon Dog Madness" ran one headline—presaging the moral panics that characterized responses to later youth music subcultures. One early edition Cleveland newspaper railed that 6,000 people had crashed the concert gates; later afternoon newspapers reported far larger crowd numbers up to 25,000 people (Jackson, 1991). The local press "gave the incident front page coverage and the wire service spread the story around the world. Suddenly, the press was talking about rock 'n' roll and its evils" (Halasa 2009, para. 5). Freed, as the public "face" of the event, was accused of purposely overselling the show and endangering the audience. On air the night after the concert, Freed apologized while also downplaying his role:

> We had no idea that the turnout would come anywhere close to the tremendous number of folks who turned out last night at the Cleveland Arena. If anyone, even in our wildest imagination, had told us that some 20 or 25 thousand people would try to get into a dance, well I, I suppose you would have been just like me, you probably would have laughed, and said they were crazy. (*The Moondog House*, 22 March 1952)

Yet, facing potential arrest, Freed downplayed his role in the event:

> I was engaged, just as Tiny Grimes' band, and Paul Williams, and the Dominoes, and Varetta Dillard, and Danny Cobb, solely to act as your master of ceremonies and to use the Moondog radio show time to advertise the ball. […] I was hired, just as the bands were hired, to appear at the arena last night, and to allow the Moondog name to be used in connection with the dance. (*The Moondog House*, 22 March 1952)

Then distancing himself from a central role the event, he expressed an explicit awareness of the precise number of ticket sales vis-à-vis the capacity of the arena:

> Now, one of the big bones of contention I notice as I read the newspapers is the fact that they say that I was the promoter of the dance which I wasn't, and secondly that the Cleveland Arena was oversold in admissions. […] we can prove that the Cleveland Arena was not oversold last night. Internal Revenue figures will prove that only 9700 tickets were sold. (*The Moondog House*, 22 March 1952)

This on-air apology makes for fascinating listening. Freed's broadcast starts out as a somber apology, turns into an ardent defense, and opens out into an invitation for listeners to phone (or send telegrams) in support of Freed and his radio program. Rather than Freed being fired, the station was apparently flooded with messages of support:

> Thank you for your wonderful telegrams and telephone calls. We're with you too, and I want you to tell us tonight that you're with us. So whatever you do,

> call us and tell us tonight that you're with the Moondog, because we've got great news, WJW's management has announced tonight, that because of the wonderful Moondoggers who turned out last night and were disappointed, that we're going to bring you more and more airtime of the Moondog show. Beginning on Monday, we're going to have a Moondog matinee every afternoon from 5 to 6 o'clock. Early evening, from 5 to 6 o'clock beginning Monday, every day, Monday through Friday, the Moondog matinee. And - beginning Monday night, the Moondog show will be heard Monday through Friday from 11.15pm until 2 o'clock in the morning, and on Saturday night, beginning next Saturday night, from 11pm until 3 o'clock. So you see Moondoggers, it all goes to show ya, that you can't push people around. (The Moondog House, 22 March 1952)

As his rebellious show's popularity soared, Freed was catapulted to greater fame and notoriety. Freed left Cleveland in 1954 for bigger markets, and bigger controversies, in New York City.

In New York, in addition to hosting radio shows (on station WINS, 1010 AM), he continued to organize concerts, most famously at the city's Fox and Paramount theaters. These are notable not only for promoting the new sounds of rock 'n' roll, but for celebrating Freed's own legacy. Reading through the many concert programs and promotional materials, 1954-1959, accounts of the Moondog Coronation Ball appear repeatedly as part of Freed's biography. One example, the program from "Alan Freed Christmas Jubilee" (1956), reads typically:

> In March 1952, Freed decided to cash in on the success of Rock and Roll by staging a Moondog Ball in the Cleveland Arena, which has a capacity of 10,000. About 9,000 tickets were sold in advance, and the night of the ball 30,000 persons showed up, crashing the doors down and bowling over the outnumbered cops. The show had to be called off, but it wasn't a financial loss. Everybody had such a grand time breaking into the arena that they didn't ask for their money back.

Other biographical materials in magazines offer equally embellished re-tellings of the Moondog Coronation Ball. A November 1958 feature on Freed in *TV Radio Mirror* recounts:

> Alan launched the show and shortly thereafter stumbled into evidence of the explosive power of rhythm and blues. In October [sic], 1952, he thought it would be nice to get his listeners together for a dance. He rented the 10,000 capacity Cleveland Arena and worried whether he could draw a crowd large enough to pay expenses. 'Then,' he says, 'the lid blew off.' An estimated 30,000 fans aimed for the hall. Caught completely by surprise, the police fought to break up the traffic jam and control the crowd. The dance had to be called off and much civic commotion followed. In some circles, he was rated akin to a public enemy, but to the kids, he was like a new hero who shared the music they liked. (Bolstead, 1958, p. 70)

By the late-1950s, having appeared on radio, television, and in films, such as the biographical "Mr. Rock and Roll" (1957, dir. Dubin), Freed had become one of, if not the most, prominent spokesperson for rock 'n' roll.[6]

In addition to being a new kind of "hero", there is yet another "first" that is widely associated with Freed during his tenure in Cleveland, as the inventor of the term "rock 'n' roll". A 1957 *Pageant* magazine feature exclaimed: "Rock 'n' roll – madness or fun? – read what its inventor – Alan Freed – has to say" (Irwin, 1957, p. 56). Widely credited with this invention, Freed was among the first inductees to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986. According to Bordowitz (2004, p. 59), "Alan Freed earned a first-ballot entrance into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame largely because he gave the music its name, or at least spread the gospel of rock and roll better than any of its other early acolytes and avatars." Foremost among these is Leo Mintz, owner of Record Rendezvous.

Legend has it… Record Rendezvous and the Invention of Rock 'n' Roll

Leo Mintz founded Record Rendezvous in 1938, at 214 Prospect Avenue, offering used jukebox records bought wholesale. He moved the shop a couple doors east to 300 Prospect Avenue in 1945, where it traded until closing in 1987 as downtown Cleveland languished. During the 1940s and 50s, in an era before shopping malls, Prospect Avenue was a central thriving retail district of downtown Cleveland, with department stores, tailors, furniture and appliance stores, and theaters. Halasa (1988) noted this vibrant area was well served by public transportation, and Record Rendevous was prominently located (between East 2nd and East 4th Street) where many buses turned around to head back out of downtown (Halasa, 1988). What is now an unregenerated corner of downtown was then a prime location (Petkovic, 2017).[7]

FIGURE 1. [Caption] Record Rendezvous store owner Leo Mintz poses for a portrait in front of his store at 300 Prospect Avenue, c. 1950. (Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images)

Halasa's (1988) feature for the local weekly entertainment magazine *Cleveland Scene* appeared just a year after the store closed. It celebrates a number of historical highlights for Record Rendezvous and Mintz. Record Rendezvous was the "first self-serve record store" (Halasa, 1988, p. 5), bringing records out from behind the counter for customers to handle directly. Mintz is also said to have installed "the first listening booths in the nation" for customers to sample records

before buying them (Halasa, 1988, p. 5). A visionary salesman in efforts to promote the shop and its products, Mintz advertised records on local radio stations, for example, by creating "Record Rendezvous' Spotlight Record" to promote "the week's top hit" (Halasa, 1988, p. 5). Record Rendezvous was also aptly named; it was a social space for friends to meet up (e.g., particularly teenagers during lunch or after school) to listen to new music. In the late 1940s Mintz recognized that younger, teenage customers were shifting from jazz to rhythm and blues. According to Jackson (1991), Record Rendezvous was popular with Cleveland's black teenagers and sold a steady supply of R&B "race" records. Mintz also encouraged radio DJs to play new releases. In this regard Halasa (1988, p. 5) suggests that Mintz wanted to create a new "gimmick" to "ease the crossover of this race music to the white public." Here Mintz is said to have relied on, and also greatly influenced, Alan Freed.

According to Jackson (1991, p. 33), part of the myth of the invention of rock 'n' roll has it that "Freed's introduction to rhythm and blues" occurred during a visit to Record Rendezvous. He is said to have stepped in when Mintz reported "noticing a growing number of white teenagers frequenting his store, browsing through the rhythm and blues record section, listening to black stars" (p. 33). Freed was "taken aback by the 'unusual' sight of white youths perusing the heretofore all-black section" of the shop (p. 33). Here the story assumes legendary status along racial lines, as Jackson continues: "the myth took shape with Freed saying he was 'amazed' at the sight before his eyes with (presumably white) teenagers 'enthusiastically listening to a type of music I presumed alien to their culture'" (pp. 33-34). Jackson refutes this "romanticized" story: photographs of Freed's early concerts (1952-1953) clearly indicate overwhelmingly black audiences. It wasn't until Freed moved to New York that the racial composition his concert audiences became predominantly white. Four months after moving to New York, in early January 1955 Freed hosted two "dances" (concerts) at the St Nicholas Arena, (an ice rink that also hosted boxing, much like the Cleveland Arena). Fredericks (1958, p. 89) notes that it was at these events that rock 'n' roll audiences first became visibly mainly white:

> In Cleveland, Freed's radio audience had been mainly Negro, and the crowds that jammed his Moondog balls were largely Negro, although as time went on the ratio of whites to Negroes increased. When the two-day stand at St Nick was over, after drawing 7,000 each night into a place that has a capacity of 4,000, Freed found that the audience was 70% white and 30 per cent Negro. In effect, this meant that Rock and Roll had moved out of the limited 'race' classification into big business.

Jackson (1991) also dismisses the idea that at that time white teenagers were increasingly appearing in Mintz's store to buy R&B records. Scott (1982, p. 11D) notes that Cleveland's local press reported that the audience at the Moondog Coronation Ball was "only about 1%" white. In search of his gimmick to sell the developing craze for R&B, Mintz offered to "buy" Freed a radio show "if you'll play nothing but rhythm and blues" (Jackson, 1991, p. 35). Mintz's reasoning was simple economics; he wanted to shift records. Indeed, Jackson writes that Mintz saw "Freed's entire WJW radio program as one giant commercial for his Record Rendezvous merchandise" (p. 35).

Freed's embrace of R&B is less clear. Reflecting on his involvement with the birth of rock 'n' roll in the November 1958 issue of *TV Radio Mirror* magazine, Freed recounted: "By the time I moved to Cleveland in 1949, I was a confirmed rhythm and blues fan'" (Bolstead, 1958, p. 70). Freed claimed to have been playing R&B on air already, although at a ratio of about 1 in 20 records, until he met Mintz:

> He [Freed] had no thought of increasing the ratio until Leo Mintz, owner of Record Rendezvous, offered to sponsor his show if Alan would play nothing but rhythm and blues records. Alan was flabbergasted. 'Are you crazy?' he demanded. 'No one would listen. Those are race records.' 'Not any more they aren't,' said Mintz. 'I've been watching my customers. I know who buys them.' (Bolstead, 1958, p. 70)

This narrative is loosely repeated throughout the various promotional materials for Freed's 1954-1959 concerts in New York City, which featured not only biographical information for the artists on the playbill, but—usually first and foremost—for Freed too. The program for "Alan Freed's Summer Festival" (1957) reads:

> One day in 1951, he was approached by his friend, Leo Mintz, owner of Cleveland's largest record shop. Mintz had noticed that so-called 'race' records—rhythm and blues—seemed to be getting more and more popular. If Alan would do a special show with them, Mintz would sponsor it. At first Freed was reluctant but Mintz persuaded him to go along.
>
> What could they call the show? The racial 'stigma' of rhythm and blues, hitherto only aimed at the Negro market, had to be somehow avoided if a wider audience was to be reached. So Freed and Mintz sat around playing records, searching for a name. As he listened, tapping his feet and rocking to the heavy back beat, Freed diffidently suggested: 'How about this—The Rock and Roll Party?"

This is echoed, with slight variation, in the later content of the "Alan Freed Christmas Jubilee" (1957):

> Freed returned to radio [after 18 months in TV], on WJW in Cleveland, at the urging of Leo Mintz, owner of Cleveland's largest record shop, who noticed that 'race' records—rhythm and blues—were beginning to get popular and believed that a R & B craze might be imminent. Freed played only R & B on his show, although he christened the style Rock and Roll to avoid the racial stigma of the old classification.

Mintz's wife, Betty, recalled yet another version of the meeting where Mintz and Freed hit upon their "new" name: "I happened to be sitting there, and Leo said, 'when the kids come in the door of Record Rendezvous, they never walk. The music is playing, and they rock and roll into the store'" (Halasa, 1988, p. 5). Betty Mintz also asserted that it was Leo Mintz who "selected the records for Freed to play. Once he started, Alan got very interested and realized there was a big following for it" (Halasa, 1988, p. 5). In retelling this story, promotional materials for Freed's NYC

concerts variously credit Mintz; other times they offer almost no acknowledgement. The concert program for "Alan Freed's 3rd Anniversary Show" (1957) dubs Freed the "High Lama of Rock 'n' Roll" and omits Mintz by name entirely:

> A Cleveland record dealer urged him to return to radio ('At first I told him radio was dead.') and specialize in rhythm and blues. Freed agreed, came up with the term rock 'n' roll ('it seemed to suggest the rolling surging beat of the music') and went into business on WJW.

Alternately, the December 1958 concert program for "Alan Freed Presents the Big Beat" featured Bill Haley and his Comets, The Everly Brothers, Chuck Berry, Frankie Avalon, and Bo Diddley, among others, again along with content on Freed himself. Here Freed conceded: "It was more Leo's [Mintz] idea than mine. […] Only the other day he called me up and told me, 'I had the foresight and you're making all the money.'"

Of course, by 1952 the phrase "rock 'n' roll" had been in use for some time (Johnstone, 2007; Peterson, 1990), not least as a euphemism for sex. Jackson (1991) argues that accounts of Freed and Mintz sitting down to coin a new phrase are myths. Freed didn't "invent" rock 'n' roll; he marketed it. This involved a kind of re-branding: "Freed appended the phrase 'rock & roll' to black rhythm and blues" (Jackson, 1991, p. 1). As this music "caught on with the growing white audience that enjoyed the luxury of money to burn and time to kill, Freed quickly realized he was positioned to become rock & roll's first prominent spokesperson" (Jackson 1991, p. 1). In the *Encyclopedia of Cleveland* (2017, para. 2), Leo Mintz is recognized as "Freed's supporter", and Record Rendezvous "sponsored all of Freed's concerts including The Moondog Coronation Ball at the Cleveland Arena on 21 March 1952, the first rock concert." Yet, after Freed departed Cleveland for New York City "taking with him the credit for starting rock 'n' roll", Mintz remained in Cleveland and "operated his popular record store until six months before his death in 1976. In those years he regaled his customers with tales of inventing rock 'n' roll." (*Encyclopedia of Cleveland*, 2017, para. 2).

Such tales—myths—are partial truths, or fictions, that privilege particular versions of a shared social reality (Barthes, 1972). As they are told and retold, myths develop into accepted aspects of particular cultural practices. Thus, myths are more than simply fables, tales or falsehoods; they involve the social construction of collective realities and shared cultural meanings. A myth therefore can be considered "a story by which a culture explains or understands some aspect of reality or nature" (Fiske, 1990, p. 88). As Cleveland journalist Petkovic (2017, para. 9) noted: "Looking back at things we call 'legendary' often results in mythmaking." Yet these legendary stories—myths—are often powerfully mobilized as cultural heritage. The penultimate section of the chapter explores this mobilization in Cleveland's (ultimately successful) bid to become the site of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Mythologizing and Heritagizing Cleveland

Beyond Alan Freed, Cleveland radio DJs were instrumental in the mythologization of Cleveland as a "music city". Throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s,

Cleveland was a vibrant radio market—Adams (2002) refers to the 1960s as a "golden age" of radio in the city. The weight of attention focused on Alan Freed overshadows the successes of other notable Cleveland radio DJs, such as Bill Randle and Tommy Edwards at station WERE, Chuck Young, Joe Finan and Wes Hopkins at KYW, and WHK's Scott Burton and Johnny Halliday (Wolff, 2006). For Young, Cleveland radio DJs were the key to making the city's popular music legacy:

> I can't tell you how many records that Bill Randle at WERE and Joe Finan, Big Wilson and myself at KYW broke in a 10-year period between the '50s and the '60s that made Cleveland the Rock 'n' Roll Capital. We were so big that people in the music business knew if it was played here it would spread all over the country. (Halasa, 1990a, p. 9)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, later it was also radio DJs who were most vocal in celebrating Cleveland as the "birthplace" of rock 'n' roll. Apart from dedicated radio personalities and a handful of rock historians, there appears to have been little awareness in Cleveland of its own popular musical heritage. Reviewing Charlie Gillett's (1970) landmark book *Sound and the City*, one Cleveland journalist expressed bemusement at the mention of Freed's tenure in Cleveland: "Remember Alan Freed, the King of the Moondogs? Brace yourself for this: He may have been a significant figure in American musical history" (McGunagle 1971, p. 3).

In 1972, local radio producer Billy Bass of station WMMS, began calling Cleveland "the rock 'n' roll capital of the world" (Gorman and Feran, 2007; Halasa 2009). Another slogan also coined by WMMS was "Cleveland: Where ROCK began to ROLL". The Greater Cleveland Growth Association adopted both mottos in the mid-1980s during the competition to become the host city for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Another promotional catchphrase included the line "Rock 'n Roll—born in Cleveland!" The idea that Cleveland was where rock started was deeply entrenched by 1984, when local DJ Steve Petryszyn, opined: "You know, Nashville's got country […] and Cleveland is the birthplace of rock 'n' roll. Whether you contest the 'Capital' boast or not, you can't deny that Cleveland was the birthplace" (Petryszyn, 1984, p. 7).

In the early 1980s, a "Foundation" committee of leading music industry figures was established to plan for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. Led by Ahmet Ertegun of Atlantic Records, other members of the Foundation included *Rolling Stone* magazine co-founder Jann Wenner, Bruce Springsteen's manager Jon Landau, music industry attorneys Suzan Evans and Allen Grubman, and record executives Seymour Stein, Bob Krasnow, and Noreen Woods. New York radio DJ, rock historian—and Cleveland native—Norm N. Nite also joined the committee. Nite was approached to participate by Stein, who wrote in a letter dated 4 June 1984:

> Some of my fondest teenage memories are of the old Alan Freed rock and roll reviews at Brooklyn's Fox and Paramount Theatres during the Christmas and Easter school breaks. In addition to great headliners such as Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis, Freed was very much of a star himself.

The addition of Nite to the Rock Hall organizing committee was fortuitous. As an ardent champion of Cleveland, Nite helped celebrate the legacy of Freed and the Moondog Coronation Ball as part of Cleveland's bid. Stein's letter to Nite also invokes the concerts—and perhaps the concert programs?—that featured Freed and spotlighted Freed's accounts of the Moondog Coronation Ball in Cleveland. In competition for the Rock Hall with New York City, Philadelphia, Memphis, Chicago, Nashville and San Francisco, Cleveland seemed a long shot. It is little surprise that the city built its campaign on the pillars of Freed and the Moondog Coronation Ball in celebrating its rock 'n' roll heritage.

But what, again, of Leo Mintz and Record Rendezvous? In 1985, members of the Rock Hall Foundation visited Cleveland to view possible sites for the Rock Hall (if Cleveland was to win the right to build it), "including ones with a rich music heritage (such as the site of the former Arena)" (Adams, 2002, p. 569). During a 5-hour bus tour, the Rock Hall's eventual location took a noteworthy turn, as Adams (2002, p. 569) describes:

> at the suggestion of Congresswoman Mary Rose Oakar, the bus turned onto Prospect Avenue—to the horror of other Clevelanders on board (after all, Prospect had seedy adult bookstores, hookers, boarded-up buildings, and homeless people). But Prospect was the address of Record Rendezvous, which is as much a part of this city's history as the Moondogger [Freed] himself. […] Upon seeing the renowned store, Ertegun stopped the bus, got off, and proceeded into the old building. The founder of Atlantic Records spent time chatting with the young people there about rock and roll and even bought some records for his own collection. By the end of the stop, he was open to the notion that Cleveland was, perhaps, the right place for the Rock Hall after all, even going so far as to sign a pro-Cleveland petition before walking out the door.

Here, arguably, Adams hits upon the heart and soul of Cleveland's rock 'n' roll heritage. On 6 May 1986, Cleveland celebrated the news that the Rock Hall Foundation had awarded the city the rights to build the museum. This "victory" was not about icons, popstars, or rebel musicians; this was not a tale of vaunted venues or fantastic creativity in illustrious downtown recording studios; nor was this even the story of a "new" kind of music, a "Cleveland Sound" emerging organically due to some essence of place (nor was it, thankfully, "something in the water" as du Noyer (2007) once wondered of Liverpool). Rather, even if the city's claim of being the birthplace of rock 'n' roll was only myth, it was a very persuasive in so far as it conveyed the power of Clevelanders to redefine collective memories in the midst of difficult times (Waxer, 2002) and to celebrate their collective identities as rock music fans. Thus, behind the legends of Freed, the Moondog Coronation Ball, and the handful of notable hometown musicians that it could celebrate, Cleveland's campaign was in essence built upon something more demotic; it was less about the people who made rock 'n' roll music, and more colloquially about the people who listened to it, purchased it, sold it, shared it, and talked about it.

As such, mythmaking points to the powerful meaning-making capabilities of stories that are not true or false *per se*, but that blur the distinction between true

and false, reality and illusion, as well as 'natural' and 'social' order of things. They offer, in the words of Stuart Hall (1997, p. 41, original emphasis) "a message about the *essential meaning*" of popular culture. In this case, the message was Cleveland is "where rock began to roll" and "birthplace" of rock and roll. The city's campaign provided an expression of civic pride, a collective rallying-cry, or celebration of the city's popular music fans. One contemporary radio DJ, "Kid Leo" put it: "The hall and museum will not only be dollars for our economy, but a major impact for our pride. We don't have to stand for those jokes about Cleveland anymore" (Paul, 1988, p. 44).

Yet, Adams' (2002) account of Ertegun's visit to Record Rendezvous infers that the Rock Hall Foundation committee took special notice of what popular music meant specifically to Clevelanders. Along these lines, Jann Wenner commented: "Cleveland alone among the competitors seemed to understand the character of what we want this to be" (Dewitt, 1986, p.1-A); that is, Cleveland offered a space to celebrate not only pop music's stars and starry moments, but also the people—i.e., *fans*—by whom popular music became a social and political force. Upon announcing Cleveland's winning campaign Ertegun commented: "the most important ingredient we saw in Cleveland was the unparalleled public support that was put behind this project […] from those 660,000 signatures on petitions, to the USA Today telephone poll, to your party [on 21 March 1986] recognizing the birthday of rock and roll" (Greater Cleveland Growth Association, 1986, p. 6).[8]

On its once rusty surface, Cleveland would not appear at first to have been an ideal choice for the placement of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Yet, the production and circulation of myths about the city's popular musical past were significant components of its improbable winning campaign in the 1980s to host the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Conclusion: "Cleveland Rocks!"[9]

Through a micro-historical case study of Cleveland's popular music heritage, particularly in the 1950s, this chapter has focused on the city as the place "where rock began to roll." Arguably its place myths mattered most In the decision to site the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. The retelling of its own stories—through mythmaking—re-invented a radio DJ, a record store, a chaotic concert and, decades later, a decaying downtown into something more.

Many have been critical of this mythmaking. Writing in the record collector's magazine *Goldmine,* a scathing article by Paul (1988, p. 5) called the decision to place the Rock Hall in Cleveland a "scandal" based on spurious claims and political fraud. Even locals were unenthusiastic at times, too. Former record promoter and radio DJ Chuck Young criticized those who embraced the city's rock 'n' roll origin myths; this re-imagining of Cleveland's past was far too wide of the mark:

> Except for those from the '50s, no one has an inkling of what happened in Cleveland. They have no idea what happened every day here in the '50s. So it is in the hands of people who didn't live it. (Halasa, 1990b, p. 14)

In a sense Young was correct, of course; as the novelist L. P Hartley (1953) famously put it, "the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there". Yet, with

cultural heritage it is not exclusively the "doing things" or "living it" that matter most, but how people make use of ideas of what happened. For Smith (2006, p. 1), this is the definition of "heritage":

> heritage wasn't only about the past – though it was that too – it also wasn't just about material things – though it was that as well – heritage was a process of engagement, an act of communication and an act of making meaning in and for the present.

It is in this sense that I stood outside the empty building at 300 Prospect Avenue in the summer of 2017 and felt a slight thrill about Record Rendezvous, even if nothing is there to memorialize it.

Notes

[1] A phrase popularized in the 1970s by local FM radio station 100.7 WMMS "The Buzzard" (see Gorman and Feran, 2007).

[2] I'm originally from Stow, a sprawling suburban area about 30 miles, or a 45-minute drive, south of Cleveland.

[3] With its population decline (to roughly 385,000 in 2014), its racial demographics shifted dramatically. The 2010 census reported the city as 33% White, 53% African American, 10% Hispanic/Latino, and 2% Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

[4] Freed was successfully sued by Hardin in 1954 and had to stop using the name "Moondog" (Jackson, 1991).

[5] The Cleveland Arena was demolished in 1977 and replaced with an office building.

[6] Freed's notoriety dimmed a short time later in the "payola" scandals (payment from record labels for radio DJs to play certain artists) that ended his New York radio career in 1959. After lower-profile jobs with stations in California and Florida, Freed passed away from alcoholism-related health problems in 1965.

[7] A photo essay by Petkovic (2017) showed contemporary interior views of the vacant premises, mixed with historical photos.

[8] *USA Today* newspaper conducted a February 1986 telephone poll to ask which city should host the Rock Hall. The results were overwhelmingly in Cleveland's favor with 110,315 votes; Memphis received 7268, San Francisco had 4006, Nashville polled 2886; New York had 2159, Chicago tallied 1030, and Philadelphia received just 1004.

[9] "Cleveland Rocks!" by Ian Hunter (1979), has become an unofficial anthem of the city, especially its sports teams. It opens with a sample of Alan Freed's radio broadcast on the Moondog Show. From 1979, it was played every Friday at 6pm on WMMS radio to start the weekend.

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