

# Cool Medium Hot

For a short time during the early years of television, local stations opened their studios to a music whose revolutionary beat advanced the cause of civil rights and other social movements in America.

By Gary Kenton

**T**he action in John Waters' 1988 film, "Hairspray," revolves around *The Corny Collins Show*, a fictional after-school TV dance series, faithfully modeled on *The Buddy Deane Show*, which aired on WJZ-TV, Baltimore, from 1957 to 1964. The film (as well as the successful Broadway play it spawned) owes much of its appeal to a vibrant soundtrack of early rock music and to evocative shots of bouncing bobby-soxers showing off their moves on the dance floor. Dramatic conflict arises when black kids and white kids insist on dancing together on camera (as they do off-camera), a violation of explicit and implicit segregationist policy. The plot is reminiscent of an incident that occurred on Alan Freed's *The Big Beat*, in which singing star Frankie Lymon danced with a white, teenaged girl. In *Hairspray*, the adults see the error of their racist ways, the show is peacefully

integrated, and the kids twist and hully-gully happily into the sunset.

Waters highlights a small moment in the struggle to end Jim Crow, but does not win any prizes for historical accuracy. In reality *The Buddy Deane Show* was canceled in 1964, despite strong ratings, shortly after a group of white students surprised viewers and management by joining a black group on stage during a live telecast. Danny Schechter, a civil rights activist, characterized the incident as "the first—and probably last—civil rights 'dance-in.'" Though "Hairspray" fails to tell the whole story, it successfully captures the liberating exuberance of the golden era of locally televised rock 'n roll. Like many golden eras in broadcasting, it did not last long.

*The Buddy Deane Show* debuted on September 9, 1957, about a month after Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* series on WFIL-TV, Philadelphia, went

network on ABC daytime. The two shows went head-to-head in the Baltimore/D.C. market for the

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next six years, with Deane consistently outperforming Clark. Deane also scooped the network show in booking hot talent, including Bill Haley and The Comets, who in their first TV appearance performed their break-out hit, "Rock Around the Clock." In 1962 *The Buddy Deane Show* reached the height of its popularity, posting numbers that made it the most-watched local daytime TV show in the nation. A half century later, mention of the program still elicits strong feelings among viewers old enough to remember it, including envy for the lucky few who survived the fierce competition to become on-camera regulars (a group known as "The Committee" or "The

Buddy Deane's"). Intense nostalgic affection is often expressed for the sense of community that

arose among the young people who gathered after school each afternoon to watch the show in a kind of urban-tribal-social ritual. The dancing, in particular, is remembered as a powerful force that transcended the traditional ethnic, racial, and economic barriers that otherwise divided the city's teenagers (and adults). In retrospect, it is clear that television was exerting a new kind of cultural power that was testing the limits of the status quo.

During the late 1940's and early 1950's, pop-music series arose on local television stations across the country. Several factors contributed to the trend. Stations needed to fill in the gap between the daytime and prime-time network



*American Bandstand, 1958, with host Dick Clark in the background.*

Photofest

feeds, and the dance-floor format was inexpensive. Record companies were happy to see their artists appear for promotional reasons. The stations, often owned by companies with radio outlets in their markets, already had disc jockeys on the payroll and were glad to promote them.

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One problem with the rock 'n roll shows was that during the period when television had just gotten a foot inside the doors of American households, it was "risk averse," to say the least. While the occasional ruffling of feathers by network news departments with controversial public-affairs documentaries might be perceived as brave, giving air time to Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, Bo Diddley or the like seemed downright foolhardy. The pioneer rock artists, whose records were inspiring bonfires by church and decency groups (sensational events widely covered by TV news), were sure to be offensive to at least some viewers and advertisers. Network TV programmers stubbornly held on to tired variety-music formats, lingering in a kind of Big Band twilight zone for decades after the end of that era in popular music. As late as 1969, NBC was trotting out prime-time shows such as *The Kraft Music Hall with Des O'Connor*, a throwback to a bygone era, hoping and praying the rock tidal wave would subside. It didn't. A large and increasingly influential segment

of the TV audience kept clamoring for more. Ed Sullivan on CBS and Steve Allen on NBC, both of whom controlled bookings for their own shows, were the great exceptions to the rule on the networks.

Local stations were more willing to take chances. The first television show designed to appeal directly to a rock audience was probably *Let's Dance* (1947) on KLAC-TV, Los Angeles. Hosted by Al Jarvis, a hugely popular radio DJ at KFVB-AM, *Let's Dance* introduced a crucial concept for inexpensive local television

production of pop music shows: it was the first show to play hit records while artists lip-synched for the camera. The technique was almost universally loathed by artists, but they were powerless to challenge the fact that giving fans the exact same sound heard on a record was essential to effective promotion. No great lover of rock music, Jarvis nevertheless established the thrifty format that Dick Clark would later turn to gold: lip-synching artists performing for a dance floor full of teenagers. Jarvis even introduced a segment devoted to rating new records. The show was set to go national on ABC, but the network's Southern affiliates refused to air the show if it presented any black performers. Jarvis, who had strong personal relationships with a number of African-American performers in Los Angeles, including Nat King Cole, refused to meet that demand, and ABC backed out.

Fittingly, rock music made its purest TV breakthrough in Memphis. According to Robert Gordon, Dewey Phillips had created a music scene even before he became a disc-jockey.

Working in the music department of W.T. Grant, a downtown five-and-dime, Phillips would play records, “howling over the intercom and causing a ruckus,” as he put it. Legend has it that he broke into radio in 1950 by taking over as host of “Red, Hot & Blue,” a nighttime show on WHBQ-AM, after setting a fire and commandeering the microphone as the regular DJ ran for help. Once at the mike, Phillips spun a free-form mix of blues, country, gospel, R&B, and western swing — the genres that coalesced to create rock ‘n roll — that caused a sensation in Memphis. By 1956, in addition to the nine-to-midnight slot, he launched an afternoon show, *Phillips’ Pop Shop*, which was

simulcast by WHBQ-AM and WHBQ-TV.

With his sidekick, Harry Fritzius, who never spoke but

pantomimed his way through comedy skits, the show combined elements evocative of Ernie Kovacs’ absurdist approach to video humor with cutting-edge rock music.

Part of the success of *Pop Shop* was its pioneering use of the time slot. The late afternoon hours between the soap operas and prime time usually lacked a network feed and constituted a weak part of the day in terms of viewership and revenue. Phillips’ infectious enthusiasm had kids running home from school to hear the latest sounds and see his crazy stunts. Like the music itself, Phillips excited the audience by always seeming to be on the verge of losing control. With *Pop Shop*, WHBQ showed what could be done with late afternoon time to build audience and attract advertisers. Stations around the country took notice. Front-office

fears of anti-rock ‘n roll backlash were eclipsed by the promise of a new revenue stream, and TV producers were suddenly scouring local radio stations for photogenic disc jockeys to throw in front of the camera. With no established models to follow, each show developed unique features reflecting the idiosyncrasies of locale and host. Cities across the country sprouted rock shows, though none ever quite embodied the anarchist spirit of Dewey Phillips’ *Pop Shop*. Some notable series included *The Milt Grant Show* in Washington, D.C.; Robin Seymour and Bill Davies’ *Dance Party* in Detroit; Clark Race’s *Dance Party* in Pittsburgh, and *The Clay Cole Show* in New York City.

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The most influential radio-DJ-turned-TV-host was Alan Freed. Freed got his start in Cleveland in 1951 when record store owner Leo Mintz convinced him to do a radio show on WJW-TV. Calling his program *Rock and Roll Party*, Freed is often credited with coining the term by which the music has been known ever since. Not satisfied to remain a faceless voice behind the microphone, Freed took a huge gamble and booked a live show, “Moondog Coronation Ball,” into the 10,000-seat Cleveland Arena. When more than 25,000 kids showed up, police shut down the event. The scene scared municipal officials, but confirmed to Freed that he had caught a new cultural movement by the tail. Throughout his career, Freed was dogged by detractors who saw him as a catalyst for juvenile delinquency.

In 1954 Freed moved *Rock and Roll Party* to WNJR, Newark, an R&B station that put him in the New York City market. He was soon snapped up by WINS in Manhattan and then by WABC, which would emerge as the leading rock radio station in the nation's biggest market during the AM era. *Rock and Roll Party* became the hottest show on the air in the Northeast. Freed continued to host live shows — and they continued to cause controversy. One show defied an outright ban on live rock 'n roll in New Haven; another Freed show was the scene of a riot in Boston. Signing a deal with Paramount Pictures, Freed made the first Hollywood rock 'n roll feature film, "Don't Knock the Rock," which included performances by Little Richard, Bill Haley and the Comets, and The Treniers. He followed with two more films featuring top musical talent: "Rock, Rock, Rock" and "Rock Around the Clock." Having conquered the airwaves, the concert stage, and the big screen, Freed moved on to television in 1957, hosting *The Big Beat* on MetroMedia's WNEW-TV, New York, six times a week (weekdays after school and Saturday nights).

A hero to the rock audience and to rock musicians, Freed became a convenient scapegoat for the forces aligned against rock music. By the time *The Big Beat* premiered on television, he was beginning to compromise under pressure. The talent lineup on his first telecast included Connie Francis, the Everly Brothers, Ferlin Husky and the Billy Williams Quartet, a far cry from the raucous, rhythm-and-blues acts he presented on his early radio shows and onstage in Cleveland and Newark. He did, however, manage to introduce TV

audiences to such stars as Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Clyde McPhatter, Jerry Lee Lewis and Mickey and Sylvia.

Perhaps the most memorable moment of *The Big Beat* series took place on November 26, 1959, when two police detectives showed up at the studio to serve Freed with a subpoena. He was accused of accepting money in return for playing records. Within days the word "payola" had entered the lexicon. WABC radio dropped Freed like a hot potato. *The Big Beat* continued on television for a while, but when Frankie Lymon danced on camera with a white woman, ABC seized the moment to drop the show, bringing Freed's television career to an abrupt end. He returned to radio with airtime at Westinghouse's KDAY in Los Angeles and then WQAM in Miami, but only briefly. Alan Freed died eight years later, at age 43, of causes related to drinking.

A lesser-known name in local TV rock history is Bob Horn. A Philadelphia DJ, Horn had a radio show known as *Bandstand*, which he brought to WFIL-TV in 1952. The show attracted a loyal following of teenagers from three nearby high schools who came each day to dance at the studio. As the TV show gained popularity and took up more of Horn's time, Dick Clark, then an unknown, took over the *Bandstand* radio show. When Horn was arrested in 1956 for driving under the influence (just as WFIL was waging a PSA campaign against drunk driving!), Clark was brought over to the TV side with instructions to reassure jittery sponsors that rock 'n' roll was just good clean fun. Within a year, Clark made a deal with ABC president Leonard Goldenson to take the show national;

*American Bandstand* premiered in October, 1957. Local competition folded in many markets, but Baltimore and Memphis, where Buddy Deane and Dewey Phillips, respectively, resisted. Viewers in those markets found their homegrown shows too cool to mess with.

When rock music burst onto the scene in the 1950's, television — like much of the country — was caught between two impulses. One was to

put a lid on it; the other, to dance to it. The broadcast television networks, in their shared goal “not to offend,” were overly cautious and fell decades behind popular taste in their presentation of music. But for a short time during the early years of television, local stations opened their studios to a music whose revolutionary beat advanced the cause of civil rights and other social movements in America.

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