

Jews in Rock 'n' Roll

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The story of how Jerome Felder, a Jewish boy from Brooklyn, afflicted with polio at an early age, triumphed over his disease and circumstances to become first a blues singer, then a song-writer and then a mentor to generations of musicians is fascinating. And certainly both the protagonist and many of the other characters in the story are Jewish, but I ask you, is this a Jewish story? And by that I mean does this story speak to our identity as Jews? Should a story about rock and roll be considered part of the American Jewish experience, of our history? I think it does and I will offer my reasons why.

Let me start off by saying that there is a tendency to sanitize history, to omit or at least to downplay those parts that do not fit into a preconceived mould. We leave out or filter details, events, even people, whose lives don't fit with the message that we want to convey. At least in my generation, Jewish mothers pointed with pride to Jewish scientists, doctors, lawyers, millionaires, etc. and not so much at Jewish rock and rollers. I can understand why, but it is still unfortunate and diminishes our history as a whole. Jews were a key part of rock and roll from the very beginning and it should remain part of our heritage.

I suppose we should define what rock and roll is. Let's go to the source, to the man credited with coining the phrase rock and roll. Alan Freed was born in 1921, the son of a Jewish father, Charles Freed, and a Welsh-American mother, Maude Palmer. While Alan was in high school, he started a band called the *Sultans of Swing*. Alan played the trombone and wanted to grow up to be a band leader. An ear infection would force Alan to choose another career. He would become interested in radio while a student at Ohio State University. It was while serving in the Army during World War II that Freed would first become a DJ. This would become his career. While working at WAKR in Akron, Ohio, in the late 1940s, Freed would meet Leo Mintz, the owner of the *Record Rendezvous*, one of Cleveland's largest record stores. Mintz had begun selling rhythm and blues records from his store and he encouraged Freed to start playing these records on his show. In 1951, Mintz would convince Freed to move to Cleveland and join the WJW station as the midnight host. Freed played music as originally recorded by African-American artists, instead of the cover versions recorded by white artists, and would be



instrumental in arranging live concerts attended by racially mixed audiences. From its very beginnings, rock and roll was a force for social change.

It was either Freed or Mintz that first coined the term “rock and roll,” but it was certainly Alan Freed that made it popular. Freed would define it as follows: “Rock and roll is a river of music that has absorbed many streams: rhythm and blues, jazz, rag time, cowboy songs, country songs, folk songs. All have contributed to the big beat.”¹ Although its influence and popularity would spread throughout the world, rock and roll began as an American form of music; in fact as a fusion of several American forms of music.

In the early days of rock, Jews were not primarily performers. Rather, they were the movers and shakers behind the scenes. An example was Chess Records. Established record companies were not comfortable working with African-American performers. They would have their own white artists record covers of R&B and rock songs. This was not the case with Chess Records, which proudly carried the work of artists such as Bo Diddley, Willie Dixon, Chuck Berry, Howlin Wolf and Muddy Waters. These Chess artists would influence the later work of *The Beatles*, *The Rolling Stones*, *The Beach Boys*, *Eric Clapton* and many others. Chess Records was owned by Leonard and Phil Chess, who had been born Fiszel and Lejzor Cxyz in Poland.

In 1955, it was Chess Records that would release the song *Maybellene* recorded by Chuck Berry. Chuck Berry had been referred to Chess Records by Muddy Waters and had brought in a recording of a song called *Ida May*, which was his adaption of a country song *Ida Red*, as well as some more traditional blues material. It was the blues that Berry thought would sell. But when he met with Leonard Chess, the owner was excited by the idea of a “hillbilly song sung by a black man.” Chess thought that the names *Ida May* or *Ida Red* were too rural. What happened next is the stuff of legend.



According to Berry’s partner Johnnie Johnson, Leonard spotted a mascara box on the floor of the studio and Chess said, “Well, hell, let’s name the damn thing Maybellene.” They would alter the spelling to avoid a suit by the cosmetic company. The lyrics were rewritten at the direction of Chess as well. “The kids wanted the big beat, cars, and young love,” Chess recalled. “It was the trend and we jumped on it.” His instincts were good; the song was a big hit on R&B, Country and Western and pop charts and is widely credited with ushering in the modern rock and roll era.²

In what was not an uncommon form of payola, Alan Freed would receive credit as a co-author of the song, as would Russ Fratto, who loaned Chess money. Because they were listed as co-authors, Freed and Fratto would receive part of the royalties, which should have gone to Berry. This “encouraged” Freed to play certain records. Payola was legal at that time. It was his refusal to admit that he took payola that would eventually cost Freed his job. Others, such as Dick Clark, admitted they took payola, agreed not to do it anymore, and went on with their careers. When Freed was let go, his place on the airwaves was

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Freed

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maybellene>

taken by another Jew, Murray “the K” Kaufman. And after Kaufman had his run, in 1959 the next big disc jockey would be Bruce “Cousin Brucie” Morrow, whose real last name was Meyerowitz.

While Freed was a not a real song-writer, there were plenty of real Jewish song-writers out there. And most of them were working at the Brill Building. Located at 1619 Broadway in Manhattan, between 49th and 50th streets, the Brill Building (and the nearby 1650 Broadway, which housed Aldon Music and other music companies) was the Promised Land for Jewish songwriters³. They would come to the Brill Building from their homes in the Bronx or Brooklyn, often taking the subway to Manhattan. If they were prolific enough and successful enough, they would buy homes on Long Island. In becoming songwriters, these Jews were following a tradition that began with Irving Berlin and continued on with Ira and George Gershwin, with Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein.

Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman are credited with over 500 songs. In a good week, they would churn out a dozen completed songs. Many of these songs were top hits, including *Little Sister* (an Elvis hit), *This Magic Moment* and *Save The Last Dance For Me* (*The Drifters*.) But they weren’t the only prolific duo.⁴



Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller had their first hit with *Hard Times* recorded by Charles Brown in 1952⁵. That same year, they would write *Hound Dog*, for Big Mama Thornton. In 1956, Elvis would re-record that song, which became a huge hit. When Leiber told Stoller the good news, Stoller replied “Who’s Elvis?” Helping the song’s success was Elvis’ risqué performance of the number on the Ed Sullivan show. Leiber and Stoller would also write *Jailhouse Rock* for Elvis, *Love Potion #9* for The Clovers, *Yakety Yak* for The Coasters, and many more. They would also contribute on the songs *Stand By Me* (Ben E. King) and *On Broadway* (written with Barry Mann and Cynthia

Weil.)

Leiber and Stoller would influence generations of song writers, including Mann and Weill and Carole King (Carol Klein) and Gerry Goffin. Also working at the Brill Building was King’s one-time boyfriend, Neil Sedaka and his partner Howard Greenfield. Another successful publishing company with offices nearby was Aldon Music, owned by Don Kirshner. Kirshner had been born in the Bronx, the son of Gilbert Kirshner, a tailor. In addition to the writers already mentioned, Kirshner is credited with discovering Neil Diamond, Paul Simon and Bobby Darin. After selling Aldon Music, Kirshner would shape the careers of bands including *The Monkees* and *Kansas*.⁶

Also influenced by both Pomus and Shuman and Leiber and Stoller was a performer/writer named Phillip Harvey “Phil” Spector, who would become best known



³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brill_Building#1650_Broadway

⁴ <http://www.chutzpahmag.com/archives/1970>

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerry_Leiber_and_Mike_Stoller

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Kirshner

as a producer. Spector developed a particular style of recording, using large groups of musicians with multiple artists playing the same instruments to yield a fuller sound. This so-called Wall of Sound worked very well on AM radio and the juke boxes of the day. Spector signed *The Righteous Brothers* to his label in 1965, and produced *You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'*, which became a #1 single⁷. Other hits followed, including *Just Once in My Life*. In the Sixties, Spector left music for a while, returning to help the Beatles salvage the abandoned "*Get Back*" recording sessions. Using his production techniques and making major changes to the arrangements and sounds, the album would be released as *Let It Be* and would have three #1 singles: *Get Back*, *The Long and Winding Road* and *Let It Be*. Spector would then co-produce George Harrison's multi-platinum album *All Things Must Pass*. Not too shabby for a kid from the Bronx. (Although in view of Phil's 2009 conviction for second-degree murder, maybe he never really left the streets.)

We have talked about disc jockeys, record company owners, producers. For the final part of this presentation, we'll cover an artist who appears in the film. Lewis Allan Reed was born March 2nd, 1942, at the Beth El Hospital in Brooklyn. His father, Sidney Joseph Reed, was a successful accountant and had changed the family name to Reed from Rabinowitz. Lewis would grow up in Freeport, Long Island.

Lewis was a bit of a rebel. He taught himself to play guitar by listening to the radio. He loved rock and roll and rhythm and blues. As a teenager, he would make a recording as part of a doo-wop group. Lewis could often be seen zipping around Long Island on a motorcycle with his guitar on his back. None of this fit in with his father's vision. Even worse, Lewis had begun to display "homosexual tendencies." His parents had him committed to Rockland County Hospital where, with his parent's permission, he was given electroshock therapy 25 times. He would describe the experience as follows: "They put the thing down your throat so you don't swallow your tongue, and they put electrodes on your head. That's what was recommended in Rockland County to discourage homosexual feelings. The effect is that you lose your memory and become a vegetable. You can't read a book because you get to page seventeen and have to go right back to page one again." Lou would write about the experience in the song "*Kill Your Sons*."⁸



Lou Reed would survive the treatment (although he would remain bi-sexual) and attend Syracuse University as an English major, beginning in 1960. In 1963, he would drop out, move to New York, and start working as a song-writer for Pickwick Records. It was through his friendship with Doc Pomus that Lou was able to break into the music business.

Lou would meet fellow musicians John Cale, Sterling Morrison and Maureen Tucker. They would form a band called *The Velvet Underground*. Andy Warhol, who wanted to have a rock band as he would later dabble in theatre, would manage the band.

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phil_Spector

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lou_Reed

Andy was responsible for adding German vocalist, Nico, to perform on the band's first album, which was released in 1967.⁹ Nico was the girlfriend of both Lou Reed and John Cale at various times.

The album was not successful when first released, but today is regarded as one of the most influential of all time. Rolling Stone magazine lists it as the thirteenth most influential; musician Brian Eno is quoted as saying that very few people bought the album, but everyone that did was inspired to form their own band.

The success of the album was due to Lou Reed's songwriting ability. While the songs of the Fifties and early Sixties were about teen love, cars, surfing, hanging out at the malt shop, Lou Reed was writing songs about drug use, homosexuality and mental illness. His choice of subject matter was influenced not only by his own experiences, but by the work of authors that he had read in college such as Allen Ginsberg, Raymond Chandler, Nelson Algren and William Burroughs. In explaining his dark choices of subject matter, Reed would say "That's the kind of stuff you might read. Why wouldn't you listen to it? You have the fun of reading that, and you get the fun of rock on top of it."

The 1960s were a much darker decade than the 1950s and the songs of that time reflected that. 1967 was a year of Vietnam, of war in the Middle East, of race riots in US cities, etc. Lou Reed's music reflected this. The songs were shocking, by intent. But his music was also smart, intellectual. And as Doc Pomus had helped and influenced him, Lou Reed would influence a generation of musicians that followed where he had led. In the late 1960s and 1970s, a new music scene would spring up in clubs around New York. These punk rock bands were loud, irreverent, intellectual and often Jewish. As the band the Dictators once sang:

I knocked 'em dead in Dallas

And I didn't pay my dues

Yeah, I knocked 'em dead in Dallas

They didn't know we were Jews

Epilogue:

On November 30, 2003, the City of New York honored Jeffry Ross Hyman, better known as lead singer Joey Ramone of the band The Ramones by designating 2nd Street and Bowery as "Joey Ramone Place." Joey died of lymphoma in 2001, one month before he would have turned 50 years old. Joey had been active in many charities, including Artists Against Apartheid and monies from his posthumous birthday party were donated to the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society.¹⁰

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Velvet_Underground_%26_Nico

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joey_Ramone

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