

Dick Clark — The Early Years

'It's got a great beat, and it's easy to dance to'

By Bob Shannon

In 1949, after 18 years, Fred Allen's long-running network radio show was canceled. Allen blamed television. "It's a device," he said, "that permits people who haven't anything to do to watch people who can't do anything."

Allen may have been too old to get it, but Brian Wilson wasn't. In 1964 he wrote and recorded a forgettable LP track called "Do You Remember?"

Little Richard sang it and Dick Clark brought it to life, Danny And The Juniors hit a groove, stuck as sharp as a knife, Well, now, do you remember all the guys that gave us rock 'n' roll?

Yes, Virginia, now we're talking about rock 'n' roll, but this is also a story about TV and how it blasted the rock 'n' roll revolution into our living rooms and, in the process, scared the hell out of anyone over 30. Dick Clark, however, was only 26.

"I was young, naive and very innocent," he says. "I didn't know about politics or big business and didn't know there was a concerted effort to kill the music." At the time — let's round it up to 50 years ago, the same way ABC-TV will do on Friday, May 3, when it telecasts *American Bandstand's 50th Anniversary* — Clark didn't have an inkling that he'd have to fight for rock 'n' roll's legitimacy before Congress or that it would be the foundation of his entire career.

On July 9, 1956, George Koehler, GM of WFIL-TV/Philadelphia, announced that Clark would replace popular local DJ Bob Horn and become the new host of the station's afternoon dance show — *Bandstand*. In his book *Dick Clark's American Bandstand*, Clark tells of being met outside the studio by picketers furiously waving their signs. He began to speak to them, he says; he introduced himself and told them about his new job. Silence. Again, he spoke. "I've got to get to work now. If you want to come in, please do." With only two minutes to airtime the pickets caved and ran in to the studio. Relief! First crisis averted.

"I dreamed of doing the show," Clark told me last week. "It was the opportunity of a lifetime."

What it was, was a ticket to ride.

WHEN IN UTICA....

"When I was 13," says Clark, "I saw a radio show

done by Garry Moore and Jimmy Durante and decided that's what I wanted to do."

Utica, NY is near Rome, about 250 miles northwest of New York City, and today, among other things, it's the home of the Boilermaker, the largest 15-kilometer road race in the nation. But in 1946, when Dick Clark was 16, his uncle, who owned a local newspaper, was in a race with time to get a new radio station on the air. He needed help, and he turned to Clark's father.

Dick Clark the elder — yes, they have the same name — had been in the cosmetics biz for over a quarter of a century, but and broadcasting appealed to him, and, in fact, he remained in radio until retirement. (Interestingly enough, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's bio on Clark says he was WRUN's Sales Manager, not his dad. This mistake almost turned my interview upside-down; you may infer, as I did, that Clark is not amused about the historical inaccuracy.) So, while our Dick Clark clearly didn't break into radio as a sales exec, he did get his foot in the door by way of the mailroom, and it wasn't too long before he opened a mike. "I was 16," says Clark, "and was on the FM station, which, of course, nobody listened to in those days."

Clark later raced west, to Syracuse University. "I went to study radio, but they didn't have a course in it," he explains. So — and this won't surprise you — he studied business administration, labeled radio an extracurricular activity and found time to work at a local 250-watter, WOLF.

"Prior to the well-known guys, McLendon and Storz," Clark says, "there was a guy named Sherm Marshall who hired kids from the college at a dollar an hour." Clark did a country show called *The WOLF Buckaroos* and hosted *The Sandman Serenade*, the all-night Top 40 show.

FEAT OF CLAY

Dick Clark the elder picked up the phone.

"Dick," said the manager of WKTV-TV/Utica, "I need a newscaster. Would you mind if I hired your son?"

The younger Clark had his sheepskin and had returned home to work for his father, but he was ambitious, his father was supportive, and television was the perfect next step. "So I did the six and 11 o'clock news and probably did it pretty well, because I started getting job offers."

Did he leave for greener pastures?

Not yet — WKTV didn't want to release him. "The manager of the station," says Clark, "would call the guy offering me a job and say, 'You can't take this kid away.'"

So, Dick Clay (he used an airname early on, reasoning that his father was the Dick Clark everyone in Utica knew; if he were to do something stupid ... well, he didn't want to embarrass his dad) stayed at WKTV but continued to send out tapes. "Like all disc jockeys do, though I was in TV, I said to myself, 'You need to get into a bigger market.'"

The kinescopes went out to Albany-Schenectady, Philadelphia and another market — Clark says he can never remember which — and then, he says, "My father called the station manager at WFIL-TV and said, 'I've got this kid. Would you have somebody look at him?'"

Eye contact. It's all about eye contact.

"The way I won the audition was unique," says Clark. "They gave me a ream of copy and said, 'OK, we're going to the control room, and we'll call you after you've had a chance to look it over. Just read into the camera.'" In Utica Clark had discovered a secret. "We recorded the copy onto audiotape and then fed the recording into my ear, and that way I could spit it back at the camera verbatim."

They called down from the booth. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah, I said," remembers Clark, "and then I read it back to them absolutely verbatim. They were flabbergasted because there wasn't a TelePrompTer or cue cards. And that's how I got into television in Philly."

But, in fact, WFIL-TV thought he looked too young, so they assigned him a radio show instead and allowed him to do TV fill-in. One of the shows he subbed on was called *Bandstand*.

AMERICAN BANDSTAND

On Aug. 5, 1957, *Bandstand* went national. "We got a seven-week trial," says Clark. Within four weeks it was the No. 1 daytime TV show in America.

Put this in perspective. Rock 'n' roll frightened the establishment, and they were determined to bring it down. When the payola scandals hit in '59 and '60, Clark — who had done nothing wrong — was placed in the spotlight. *American Bandstand* brought him glory, wealth and fame, but he also got the blame for what some called raw, insidious "devil music."

Fortunately, things cooled down. But don't lose sight of this: Rock 'n' roll is still alive and well these 50 years later.

If it weren't for Dick Clark, it might not be.

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Dick Clark

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