

**POPULAR MUSIC, POPULAR MYTH  
AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN  
CLEVELAND**

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# **POPULAR MUSIC, POPULAR MYTH AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN CLEVELAND: THE MOONDOG, THE BUZZARD, AND THE BATTLE FOR THE ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME**

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## About the Author

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# Introduction: “Hello Cleveland?”

On May 6, 1986, in what may have felt like the first time in a long time, Cleveland was being celebrated as a winner. After months of public campaigning and civic promotion, Cleveland had been selected, with much fanfare and not a little controversy, as the site for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. The decision, as ran one front-page headline from Cleveland’s biggest newspaper, *The Plain Dealer*, “is music to the city’s ears” (DeWitt, 1986, p. 1-A). “It’s official! Cleveland gets rock hall” exclaimed *The Columbus Dispatch* (1986, n.p.), echoing a chorus of headlines from across the United States: the *Oakland Tribune* announced “Its claim to the Hall of Fame proves Cleveland was built on rock ‘n’ roll” and Cleveland is where “the heart of rock and roll beats officially” (Landsberg, 1986, n.p.). Since opening nearly a decade later in 1995, it has hosted millions of visitors from around the world (Santelli, 1997). Yet many remain surprised to learn that the “Rock Hall” is located in Cleveland, Ohio: “Why Cleveland?” asked Adams (2002). Why is the Rock Hall there, rather than in another city? From outside of Northeastern Ohio, Cleveland seems an unlikely and surprising site for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (Sheerin, 2012). What is the city’s musical claim-to-fame? For years the city was disparaged, the punch line to nearly every joke about America’s failing urban centers. How did Cleveland end up, then, being selected as the site of a major popular music museum? Is Cleveland truly “where rock began to roll,” as one radio station, WMMS 100.7 FM “The Buzzard” once put it?

This introductory chapter sets out the preliminary groundwork to begin to address these questions, as well as establishing the central themes of the book related to popular music, place, myths, and cultural heritage. These themes are interwoven within the case study of Cleveland, and more broadly, offer wider insights into challenging questions of cities, social, and economic change, the constructs of “race” and youth music cultures, as well as how these concepts are actively brought into play as cultural heritage. Following this introduction, Chapter 1 provides a pass through some of the literature on popular music and place. More than a geographical location, the term “place” invokes connections, histories, and relationships with people and territories of meaning. Although it may now be regarded as something of a secondary or regional city, Cleveland can be seen as a place where significant changes can be read through attention to popular music. In view of the “urban imaginary” (Harvey, 2000; Taylor, 2004; Zukin et al., 1998), Cleveland takes on extraordinary configurations – historically, socially, politically, and economically: as a working-class city of heavy industry

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and manufacturing; as a starkly racialized city; as emblematic of a region wracked by post-industrial deterioration; then reimagined through cultural regeneration as a center of popular music heritage, indeed, as the “capital of rock ‘n’ roll,” as WMMS also once put it. These shifting configurations are manifest across the many ways that a city such as Cleveland is conceived as an “ensemble of representations” mixed together from the “architecture and street plans of the city, the art produced by its residents, and the images of and discourse on the city as seen, heard, or read in movies, on television, in magazines, and other forms of mass media” (Greenberg, 2000, p. 228). In making my way through this “ensemble,” I attempt to trace the evolution and re-imaging of Cleveland as a “musical city.”

On the corner of East 9th Street and Erieside Avenue, right in front of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, a brown “Ohio Historical Marker” proclaims Cleveland “the birthplace of rock ‘n’ roll” for hosting “the first rock concert” (while also noting “the oversold show was beset by a riot during the first set” – more on this in Chapter 3). Local community sponsors erected this heritage marker in 1996 in partnership with the state historical society. The re-imagining of Cleveland as a “music city” of important “firsts” has transformed the metropolis “materially and discursively” and also sparked its tourism economy (Gibson & Connell, 2005, p. 14), where the Rock Hall has provided an anchor in the city’s waterfront redevelopment along with a new science center (1996) and new stadium (1999) and other attractions. According to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum’s website (n.d.-a, para. 4):

Since opening in 1995, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame has welcomed more than 10 million visitors from around the globe and generated more than \$2 billion in economic impact for Northeast Ohio. In 2015, 500,000 people visited the Rock Hall, a figure which represents a 15% attendance bump from the year before. These visitors – 90% of whom live outside of Cleveland – help the Rock Hall contribute \$107 million in annual economic impact to the region.

The attention brought to the city in terms of tourism generation was described (in baseball terms, for a city of devoted, if often disappointed, sports fans) by Rock Hall president and CEO Greg Harris as “a home-run for the local economy” (Uyricki, 2015, para. 7). Yet, beyond the celebration of its economic impacts, what of the less tangible cultural value of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland? What does the Rock Hall represent, or encapsulate, in providing a sense of place in Cleveland as a rock ‘n’ roll city?

### **Visiting Cleveland**

This volume is bookended, in a sense, by two visits to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum: my first, in 1996, and most recently, in 2017. In this, the book is also grounded, auto-ethnographically (a combination of autobiography and ethnography, see Chapter 2), by my 15-odd years as a drummer in Northeastern Ohio music scenes. It was as a member of a local band, “the frans,” that my first

visit to the Rock Hall took place, performing during the inaugural “Summer in the City” concert series on June 26, 1996, less than a year after the Rock Hall opened its doors in September 1995 (see Fig. 1).

The other bookend visit to the Rock Hall was as an archival researcher in the summer of 2017. As its Director of Education Bob Santelli pronounced in 1997, beyond its collections of artifacts and exhibitions, the Rock Hall was meant to be “first and foremost, established as an educational institution” (Santelli, 1997, p. 97), including a “world-class research center” in its library and archive. Within this remit, in 2017, I applied for and was awarded a research fellowship to visit the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives later that year. The archival material gathered during my fellowship forms the core content of this book, as I returned to my former hometown (from my current home in the United Kingdom) and sought to better understand the different stories of how – and why – the Rock Hall ended up in Cleveland.

In addition to situating my research within historical and archival research approaches toward studying popular music, Chapter 2 also provides some context regarding the city of Cleveland. When I visited in July 2017 after living abroad for over a decade and a half, Cleveland looked and felt more active and alive to me than I ever remembered it. In a bustling tourist shop near the city’s central Public Square, rows of badges and buttons were displayed for sale beside the cash register; some simply had a “C” (a logo of the city’s baseball team), some proudly stated “CLE” (the city’s airport code) or “Cleveland” in the script popularized by



Fig. 1: On June 26, 1996, the fans (L–R: Mandy Lascko, Derek Lashua, Greg Golya, and Brett Lashua) performed in front of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. Photo © Neal Hamilton.

the city's basketball team uniforms. One badge jested "I Liked Cleveland Before It Was Cool" while another knowingly joked "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 its declining industry, hard-luck sports teams, decaying infrastructure, and industrial pollution. The Cuyahoga River that winds its way crookedly through the city was once so heavily polluted that its surface repeatedly caught fire, including a conflagration in 1969 that inspired the Randy Newman (1972) song "Burn On". As an industrial city, the city had attracted waves of migrant laborers to work in its sprawling iron, steel, and automobile factories. Many "Cleveland jokes," often ridiculing particular working-class and ethnic groups such as the city's Polish-American population, were propagated in the late 1960s via a Cleveland-born TV writer named Jack Hanrahan whose lines lampooning Clevelanders featured prominently on a nationally televised comedy show, *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* (1968–1973). Was this Cleveland "Before It Was Cool?" How then did the city become "cool" (or perhaps, regain its cool?) as the site of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame? In order to trace the ins and outs of this twisting history, the book connects and contextualizes three pivotal characters and moments in the city's past: the Moondog, the Buzzard, and the Battle for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

## **The Moondog**

For some, March 21, 1952, is one of the most significant dates in rock 'n' roll history (Jackson, 1991). As discussed in further detail in Chapter 3, that night a Cleveland radio disc jockey, Alan Freed, host of the late night WJW AM 850 "Moondog" program, and local record store owner Leo Mintz, staged the "Moondog Coronation Ball." This event – although it ended after just one song and devolved into what may be considered a "race riot" – was later acclaimed as a noteworthy concert (Gillett, 1970). Arguably, for years few people were aware of its significance in Cleveland. Reviewing Charlie Gillett's (1970) landmark book *Sounds of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll*, local Cleveland journalist Fred McGunagle expressed bemusement: "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). Yet, as Halasa (1992a) subsequently noted, neither Gillett or McGunagle for that matter, used the term "first" in conjunction with the Moondog Coronation Ball. McGunagle recalled later that he did not even write the headline for his review ("March 21, 1952 – at the Cleveland Arena: the first rock festival"), and credited his editor, who, looking for "a clever headline, inadvertently dubbed the concert as the 'first'" (Halasa, 1992a, p. 12). In addition to being credited for hosting the "first" rock 'n' roll concert, Freed and Mintz also have been credited with "inventing," appropriating, re-branding or popularizing the phrase "rock 'n' roll" (depending on one's point of view). Using the phrase to avoid the "racial stigma" of rhythm and blues, they were later celebrated for delivering what was then seen as "black music" (i.e., "race records"; see Roy, 2004) to a new audience of white teenagers. For decades, except to those directly involved, the significance of the Moondog Coronation

Ball, Freed's tenure as a DJ in the city, and the importance of Mintz' record shop, were not widely known or appreciated, not even in Cleveland. Chapter 3 draws together narratives from key collections in the Rock Hall archives to trace these events and the myths that later enveloped them and their central organizers, as what would become the foundations of Cleveland's claims to fame as the mythic "birthplace" of rock 'n' roll.

## The Buzzard

Against a backdrop of the history of "progressive" radio broadcasting, Chapter 4 focuses primarily on the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s to locate a number of Cleveland radio stations led by maverick DJs and producers. During the 1970s, one new station, WMMS FM 100.7 – nicknamed "The Buzzard" after its caricature vulture logo, circling tongue-in-cheek over Cleveland's dying city center – established itself as a leading broadcaster in Cleveland. It shifted format from Top-40 to rock in 1973 and in doing so, recast Cleveland's rock 'n' roll roots. Occupying the backwater of FM broadcasting at a time when AM radio still ruled the airwaves, its cast of eccentric on-air personalities embraced an album-oriented rock (AOR) format at the moment when few expected the station, let alone FM radio, to perform very well. In this, the station became an underdog champion of Cleveland's rock 'n' roll fans and popularized the city's reputation as a "true" rock 'n' roll city. If Cleveland had a civic anthem, it would likely be Ian Hunter's (1979) "*Cleveland Rocks!*"; for years WMMS played this song every Friday night at 6 p.m. to help kick off the weekend in what was then still a largely blue-collar, working-class city.<sup>1</sup> The tune opens with a sample from Alan Freed's radio broadcast on the *Moondog Show*.

In addition to its buzzard cartoon logo, ironically symbolizing rebirth in the city, WMMS's slogans reflected its commitment to rock, drawn initially from jests about its call sign letters (e.g., "Where Music Means Something"; it, in fact, represents "Metro Media Stereo"). As early as 1972 WMMS had begun re-imagining Cleveland through its catchphrases: as "the Rock Capital," then "Where Rock Began to Roll," and later "The Birthplace of Rock 'n' Roll." Station manager John Gorman's (Gorman & Feran, 2007) memoir of his years at WMMS recounts "the story of how one [...] radio station helped revive an American city that had been written off as dead" (p. 2). One of the most enduringly popular stations in Cleveland, the station was a key player in the revitalization of Cleveland's status as a rock 'n' roll city. By the mid-1980s, WMMS had developed a nationally celebrated reputation as a rock station, and played an instrumental role in the campaign – as discussed in Chapter 5 – to bring the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to Cleveland. Adjacent to the story of WMMS in this campaign, the chapter also spotlights the person *Rolling Stone* editor (and Rock Hall Foundation member) Jann Wenner later referred to as the "unsung hero" of the battle for the Rock and Roll Hall of

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<sup>1</sup>A cover version of Hunter's song, by the rock group The Presidents of the United States, was used as the theme song from 1997 to 2004 for the ABC television sitcom "*The Drew Carey show*", which was set in Cleveland.



Fame, another radio DJ, Cleveland's Norm N. Nite. In this sense, this book traces the (air) waves from Alan Freed and other local DJs during the 1950s and 1960s, through WMMS "The Buzzard" in the 1970s and 1980s, to Norm N. Nite and the campaign for the Rock Hall in the 1980s. Along these lines, radio stations and personalities played a critical role in telling and re-telling, remembering, celebrating and mythologizing the city's popular music history.

### **The Battle for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame**

By the 1980s, Cleveland was widely satirized in popular culture (e.g., films such as *Major League*, 1989), including a scene in the cult-classic rock mockumentary film *This is Spinal Tap* (1984). In this scene, the eponymous band members become hopelessly lost in labyrinthine backstage corridors at a Cleveland venue as they attempt to find the stage. Getting themselves pumped up for the performance, they rehearse their greeting to the crowd – "Hello Cleveland!" – while becoming increasingly disoriented and exasperated; they receive incomprehensible directions and end up back where they began, with the sounds of the cheering (and eventually booing) crowd ever-present, somewhere in the distance. Part of the joke, but not in on it, Cleveland is presented as a confounding place where hapless (if fictional) bands such as Spinal Tap get stuck. This film coincided with what may have been the city's most difficult years, beset by high unemployment, decaying infrastructure, massive civic debt (Cleveland defaulted on federal loans in 1979, ignominiously the first American city to do so since the Great Depression in the 1930s), troubled schools and a declining population (Gorman & Feran, 2007). Its professional sports teams during these years often performed terribly too or were tragically unlucky. In many ways, the mid-1980s were the city's nadir.

In 1986, as a young teenager, I attended my first thrash metal concert at the Cleveland Agora. Arguably the city's premier venue, the Cleveland Agora, had just re-opened at 5000 Euclid Avenue in 1986, following a fire in 1984 that gutted its former location on East 24th Street. A phoenix of sorts, emerging from flames, seems apropos of Cleveland in the late-1980s. In more ways than this, the events of 1986 – most significantly winning the battle to build the Rock Hall – represented a potential turning point for the city. The campaign to win the right to build the Rock Hall is the heart of Chapter 5. Particularly focusing on promotional materials from the Greater Cleveland Growth Association and contemporary press accounts, the chapter explores the public and behind-the-scenes battles to convince the Rock Hall Foundation, led by Atlantic Records' Ahmet Ertegun, that Cleveland was a worthier choice than other "music cities" including Philadelphia, San Francisco, Chicago, New York, or Memphis. Here, the chapter aims to understand what set Cleveland apart from these cities that had, perhaps, more obvious, and starrier popular music pedigrees.

The question of "pedigree," or what makes a "great music city" (Baker, 2019), also runs through the book. For some, it was Clevelanders' passion for rock 'n' roll, and the opportunity to start re-inventing the city, that tipped the scales in Cleveland's favor in 1986. Although by current standards (e.g., in view of social media and viral promotions) the numbers may appear small, a nationwide *USA*



*Today* telephone poll in February 1986 asked Americans which city should host the Rock Hall. With heavy promotion from local radio stations such as WMMS, the results showed something of Cleveland's level of public support for the Rock Hall with 1,10,315 votes. No other city even came close to this number: Memphis received 7,268 votes, San Francisco had 4,006, Nashville polled 2,886; New York had 2,159, Chicago tallied 1,030, and Philadelphia received just 1,004. This poll indicated, at least via comparison to the public engagement from residents of other cities, the depth of popular support for the Rock Hall that the city had generated among its residents; Clevelanders appeared to want to Rock Hall, no matter how, or why.

To some degree, the public backing for the city's claim to the Rock Hall was built through re-imagining the legacy of the Moondog, Alan Freed, the resurrection of the Moondog Coronation Ball, and the mythic crowning of Cleveland as the place where rock 'n' roll was "invented." Whereas, once they were hardly remembered, these cultural events, irrespective of their veracity or plausibility, have since become deeply embedded in the fabric of Cleveland. While the idea of a "myth" sounds suspect or spurious, myths are powerful stories that people often use to make sense of, and understand, the world. In this, myths are more than fictions, folktales, or falsehoods; a myth can be considered "a story by which a culture explains or understands some aspect of reality or nature" (Fiske, 1990, p. 88). For Cleveland, the myth of its rock 'n' roll origins thus offered a powerful set of ideas to transform the city, physically, and symbolically, to spur its cultural regeneration and thus its future – through a celebration of its past.

## Cultural Heritage

In Chapter 6 the book turns more fully to the memorialization of the city's past and challenging questions about the processes that drive the production of popular music heritage in particular places. Here the chapter addresses processes of heritagization, asking how heritage should be memorialized and employed in "reimagining" and regenerating cities (Fairclough, Harrison, Jameson, & Schofield, 2008). Recent years have seen an intensification of scholarly interest in popular music heritage (Baker, Strong, Istvandy, & Cantillon, 2018). This scholarship has led to increased attention and further questions such as those Cohen, Knifton, Leonard, and Roberts (2014a, p. 1, original emphasis): "*what* is popular music heritage?; *where* is it located?; *why* does it matter?; *whose* popular music heritage? and *when* does popular music become heritage?" This chapter places Cleveland's popular music heritage at the center of debates spurred by these questions.

As a case study, Cleveland affords unique perspectives and different understandings of popular music heritage; in this, it does not readily follow patterns or share characteristics of other, often better known, "music cities." Gibson and Connell (2007) identified venues, recording studios, and "authentic roots" as key factors in the production of popular music heritage. Although the Cleveland Agora is a respected venue that has hosted innumerable concerts in its 50-odd year history, it has not taken on the mythical status of illustrious venues or "places of performance" (Gibson & Connell, 2007, p. 164) such as the Cavern Club in Liverpool

(Kruse, 2005) and Ryman Auditorium in Nashville (Pecknold, 2014). Neither did Cleveland have well-known recording facilities as “places of production” (Gibson & Connell, 2007, p. 164) such as Sun Studios in Memphis (Rushing, 2014) or Abbey Road Studios in London (Bennett, 2016). As for authentic musical roots, there are a handful of celebrated musicians and groups from Northeastern Ohio – Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, Pere Ubu, The Raspberries, Tracy Chapman, The O’Jays, Chrissie Hynde, Devo, Trent Reznor, Jani Lane, Marilyn Manson, among others – many of whom were born in the area yet made their fame elsewhere. Yet, Cleveland (as discussed in Chapter 2, in regard to the unfulfilled genre of “rust”) had no spectacular movements or scenes; there was not anything particularly “authentic” about popular music in Cleveland; there was no distinctive “Cleveland sound” – that is, there’s nothing “in the water” (thankfully), as discussed in Chapter 1 regarding an “essence of place.” This presents a dissonance, in terms of popular music heritage, as Gibson and Connell (2007, p. 168) noted, where:

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.

Although Gibson and Connell (2007, p. 168) offered that some “places become known as authentic sites of musical creativity, where ‘musicians came together,’ and where the ‘magic of composition took place,’” this does not particularly characterize Cleveland either. There was, notably, the 1952 Moondog Coronation Ball (Chapter 3), and this event – and the people closely associated with it – have provided one “magical” moment for the creation of a significant place myth and the heritagization of the city. Since 1992, an annual Moondog Coronation Ball concert has been hosted by local “oldies” radio station, WMJI 105.7 “Magic FM.” The most recent concert (April 1, 2017) featured Tommy James and the Shondells, Grand Funk Railroad, and Three Dog Night (there were no reports of any riots); however, in 2018 the concert was put on indefinite hiatus and its future appears in doubt (Yarborough, 2018). Is this, then, Cleveland’s claim to fame and the foundation for being a place, or site, of a significant popular music heritage?

These few, brief examples begin to spotlight challenging and contested meanings, sites, and constructions of heritage. For Smith (2006, p. 1):

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.

While often intangible, heritage matters as “memory and remembering, performance, place, and dissonance” (Smith, 2006, p. 3). It offers a resource to negotiate or contest cultural meanings, values and identity constructions (Smith, 2006).