

# We're goin' hoppin' into rock history

By William C. Kashatus

**D**ick Clark was an unlikely candidate to lead a rock-and-roll revolution. Before becoming the permanent host of *American Bandstand*, the 26-year-old disc jockey wasn't even that familiar with the controversial new music. Radio stations in Utica, N.Y., and (later) Philadelphia hadn't allowed him to play rock on his shows, insisting that he stick to more popular adult music by Perry Como and Rosemary Clooney.

Nor did his good looks and clean image square with the sexually charged innuendo of rock music, which inflamed the anger of parents, politicians and religious leaders alike. But on July 9, 1956, when WFIL-TV tapped him to host its daily after-school dance program, Clark embarked on a trying campaign to give rock and roll credibility.

Yesterday, Philadelphia joined Clark to celebrate the 40th anniversary of *American Bandstand*, unveiling a marker at 46th and Market Streets, former site of the WFIL-TV studio, where the program was filmed from 1952 until 1964, when it moved to California. It should not only bring back memories for baby boomers but also recall the contribution Philadelphia has made to the history of rock and roll.

*American Bandstand* was more than just a television show. It was a national phenomenon that helped to promote the adolescent culture of the baby-boom generation. Youthful, unthreatening and telegenic, Clark became the quintessential spokesman for the new teen culture, pitching everything from rock music to acne medication. He had a college degree in marketing and a special ability to communicate to teenagers. And, like the kids who danced on his show, Clark was well-dressed and well-behaved. The music and dance were always presentable. Alcohol and cigarettes were prohibited, which was critical to the success of the new music.

Rock and roll had plenty of critics in the mid-1950s. Religious leaders attacked it for promoting the evil influences of anti-authoritarianism and premarital sex among the young and innocent. Politicians, catering to religious conservatives, went as far as launching a congressional investigation in 1960 into payola in the music industry, in part an effort to discourage the popularity of rock and roll. Other musi-




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*Dick Clark and "American Bandstand" changed the course of music and dance.*

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cians, such as Frank Sinatra, condemned the new music as "the most brutal, ugly, desperate and vicious form of expression."

Clark and *American Bandstand* not only survived the attack but even seemed to prosper because of it. Though the investigation forced him to surrender his interests in the record business, Clark was cleared of wrongdoing and became more popular than ever. *American Bandstand's* ratings soared. Even parents began to enjoy the show as it launched the promising careers of Philadelphia artists such as Chubby Checker, Bobby Rydell, Fabian, Frankie Avalon and the Orlons.

Hundreds of teenagers lined up along Market Street, hoping to gain entry into WFIL-TV's Studio B so they could, if only for a brief moment, stroll and bob their way into the limelight. Who can forget Justine Carelli and Bob Clayton, *American Bandstand's* dream couple, who

jitterbugged into the hearts of viewers across the nation?

But the show did more than give teens a moment in the lights. Beginning in 1957, *American Bandstand* helped Philadelphia navigate the difficult straits of racial integration. Its dance floor was open to both black and white teens. It presented all kinds of music, including rhythm and blues. And it often featured R & B artists like Jackie Wilson, Chuck Berry, the Bobbettes and the Five Satins. Although Clark never saw himself as a civil rights activist, he realized that integrating the show was the right thing to do, and he did it with style and grace.

In 1989, the longest-running variety series in the history of television made its final appearance. The show lives on in reruns, and the name graces a chain of restaurants. But the music helped structure the history of a city and a nation in ways we do not appreciate enough. We should thank Dick Clark for helping give credibility not only to an important American music form but also to the notion of a more open and just society.

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