



## Handout 2 - AM Radio and Alan Freed

Though inventors had been working toward the technology for more than ten years, the first successful public radio transmissions began in the middle of the first decade of the 20th century. These amplitude modulation, or “AM” transmissions came to be known as “broadcasts.” But they were mostly experimental; the idea of radio as entertainment did not take hold until the 1920s. Commercialization, and government regulation, followed shortly thereafter. From this time until the proliferation of the TV in the 1950s, the music, dramas, talk and news shows, and also the advertising of AM radio, were the primary form of in-home and on-the-go entertainment for Americans.

While AM radio is less clear and more prone to atmospheric interference than the frequency modulation (FM) radio developed several decades later, AM radio has the capacity to travel great distances, especially after sunset when changes in the earth’s ionosphere reflect its radio waves back to the surface. Regulations on the wattage of stations--the electrical power base that projects the radio waves--prohibit North American stations from exceeding 50,000 watts. Nonetheless, some AM stations claim to reach more than 30 states at night. For a short period in the early 1960s, the pioneering Rock and Roll DJ Wolfman Jack broadcast from XHRF in Northern Mexico where looser regulations permitted 250,000 watts; his show purportedly could be heard in parts of Canada some nights.

At the beginning of the 1950s, Rock and Roll’s earliest years, AM radio was an immensely powerful media. A small group of AM DJs played a significant role in creating the concept of the genre of Rock and Roll. Cleveland DJ Alan Freed curated a frenetically paced show during which he read advertising, audience dedications and introduced his personally curated Rhythm and Blues selections using the slang of the day, such as the phrase “Rock and Roll,” which stuck. Freed’s move to New York City station WINS in 1954 made him a leading voice in the new “Rock and Roll” movement, and he capitalized by promoting events, appearing on TV shows and in movies, and by taking part in the recording industry. The picture to the right is from the 1958 Topps “Recording Stars” trading card series.

Murray the K, a successful DJ in both AM and FM formats, said of Freed, “Let rock and roll become the greatest story ever told, and Alan Freed would have to be worshipped as the man who told it first.” Murray also spoke to the DJ’s power as a tastemaker at the time, stating that when someone like Freed played a new record, “within a week it would break out all over the country, it would become a monster.”



*Alan Freed 1958 Topps  
“Recording Stars” trading card series*