

“The City that Banned Rock & Roll”
Excerpted from the forthcoming book,
*Springwood Avenue Harmony:
The Unique Musical Heritage of Asbury Park’s
West Side (1880 - 1980)*

By Charlie Horner and Pamela Horner

Well, OK. Asbury Park, NJ, didn’t actually ban Rock & Roll from the entire city, only the boardwalk area. And the ban didn’t really last very long. Still, in the eyes of the world in 1956, Asbury Park was at the forefront of the fight against this devil’s music that was driving the country’s youth to sex, drugs, moral depravity and juvenile delinquency.

For the folks on Asbury Park’s predominantly African American West Side, the infectious beat and blue notes of Rhythm & Blues had been known for some years. But by the mid-1950’s, white American teenagers were being exposed to this music in great numbers through local radio. Now called “Rock & Roll” the music faced serious backlash from alarmed parents who feared the music’s “animalistic beat” and often risqué lyrics were leading their children into juvenile delinquency. Some of the backlash was to be expected when a younger generation’s music begins to replace that of an older generation. But much of the criticism was based on systemic racism and fear that black music was a corrupting influence on our country’s white youth. Fear of Rock & Roll lessened slightly with the emergence of white artists like Bill Haley and Elvis Presley singing Rock & Roll, but the process took time. And civic and religious leaders continued to fan the flames of fear for several years.

One of the first area outcries against Rock & Roll happened in nearby Long Branch, NJ, in July 1955, when the Ja-Da La Martinique Club began booking Rock & Roll entertainers. Complaints rolled in to the Long Branch Board Of Commissioners that the club’s loud Rock & Roll music was keeping neighbors up at night. One complainer opined, “ It (Rock & Roll

music) is absolutely animalistic. It’s like having human beings revert back to animals.”

At the same time, Asbury Park initially seemed to embrace the new music. Bill Haley & the Comets, whose popularity was greatly boosted by the inclusion of “Rock Around The Clock” in the beginning of the movie *Blackboard Jungle*, were booked to play the Casino over the 1955 Fourth of July weekend. The Casino, at the south end of Asbury Park’s boardwalk boasted the largest dance floor in New Jersey along with 3000 seats and a snack bar.



Bill Haley & Comets

Haley's appearance to start the 1955 summer season marked the first time in twenty years there'd been dancing at the Casino. Competing against the more popish McGuire Sisters at Convention Hall at the other end of the boardwalk, Bill Haley drew 4,100 the first day and another 2,300 the next night. While youngsters jitterbugged through most of the show, they crowded around the bandstand a thousand strong when the Comets broke into "Shake Rattle & Roll" and "Rock Around The Clock". Joseph Rediker, operator of the Casino, obviously took note of the popularity of Rock & Roll.

Meanwhile, Asbury Parks movie theaters were also capitalizing on the popularity of Rock & Roll. In addition to Blackboard Jungle playing at the Mayfair Theatre in April, by August the Savoy Theatre in downtown Asbury Park was running Rock 'N' Roll Review, an all black musical film starring the Clovers, Ruth Brown, Joe Turner and others.

The first real Rock & Roll show in Asbury Park's Convention Hall was most likely the Easter Monday Rock & Roll Dance with Tito Puente, Gene & Eunice, Chuck Willis and the Chords on April 11, 1955. Presented by Asbury Park's West Side Athletic Association and likely had a predominately black audience.

In the black community, teenagers were emulating the vocal groups they were hearing on records and the radio. In Asbury Park High



School, the Mar-Keys were harmonizing in the gymnasium. At Neptune High School, on the edge of Asbury Park, a February 1956 assembly program featured student vocal quintet, the Silitones, singing songs by their favorite groups - "At My Front Door" (El Dorados), "Crazy For You" (Heartbeats), "Hey Senorita" (Penguins) and "A Thousand Stars" (Rivileers). A second Neptune High School group, the Citations, sang "Chapel In The Moonlight" (Orioles), "Rockin-n-Rollin" (Heartbeats), "Foolish Dreams" (Fi-Tones) and "Magic Rose" (Solitaires).

By Easter weekend 1956, Rock & Roll was full steam ahead in Asbury Park. Bill Haley & the Comets were brought back, this time to Convention Hall. The ensemble played a one night gig there on Saturday March 31. It was reported that Bill Haley had sold five million records in the past twelve months.

Bill Haley would write in his diary, "Played tonight in Convention Hall, Asbury Park, New Jersey. \$1,750 - 3,112 people. A new opening day record for here."

Two days later an all black Rhythm & Blues concert ran at Convention Hall under the guise of Rock 'N Roll. In what was becoming an annual tradition, former Asbury Park radio personality Georgie Hudson, now with WNJR in Newark, hosted the 3rd Annual Easter Monday Ball. Advertised as "For The First Time! Rock 'N Roll [at] Convention Hall," it, of course, was not. The previous year's Easter Monday Ball qualified as Rock & Roll as did the Bill Haley concert and dance two days before. But the 3rd Easter Monday Ball was significant



For The First Time!
ROCK 'N ROLL
 Convention Hall, Asbury Park

— IN PERSON —



Monday, April 2
 GEORGE HUDSON'S
 3rd ANNUAL
 EASTER MONDAY BALL

- THE NUTMEGS
- PIANO RED
and his band
- THE FI TONES
- AL SAVAGE
- THE HURRICANES

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by the line up featured. The bill looked like a who's who of the day's top black performers - the Nutmegs, the Hurricanes, the Fi-Tones, Piano Red and his band and Al Savage. By all reports, the Convention Hall event went smoothly - a calm before the storm.

By the start of the summer, while Pat Boone was playing Convention Hall, Asbury Park WJLK radio personality, Les Roberts, was bringing Rock & Roll shows to nearby Belmar, NJ. A May 20 show at the Deck, F Street and 5th Avenue, featured James Shepard & the Heartbeats ("Darling How Long"), Don Bruce ("Love Leads A Fool" recorded with the Four Beats) and Bob Oakes & the Sultans. While both the Heartbeats and Don Bruce were black R&B performers, Bob Oakes and his Sultans were a white Rock & Roll band in the style of Bill Haley's Comets. Their recording of "You Gotta Rock & Roll" had just been released by Regent Records in Newark. Interestingly, the flip was a R&R version of the black vocal group, Willows, "Church Bells May Ring".

Three weeks later, on June 9, 1956, Les Roberts was back at the Deck, this time with the help of Georgie Hudson. Performing were Harlem's Willie Winfield & the Harptones, hot off their recording of "What Is Your Decision". Opening for the Harptones were again Bob Oakes & his Sultans. Sadly, newspaper ads misprinted the Harptones name as the "Harp Tongs". That same night, the Platters played Convention Hall without incident.

Spurred on by the success of Bill Haley & the Comets and Platters at Convention Hall and the recent black Rock & Roll acts at the Easter Monday Ball, the Rediker brothers were ready to bring in the hottest black Rock 'N Roll act. The Rediker brothers, Joseph, William and Albert Rediker, had been leasing Convention Hall from the City to produce dances and concerts for the past ten years. Originally from Brooklyn, the Rediker brothers had relocated to the Jersey Shore around 1940 and opened Reeds Jewelers with stores in Asbury Park, Long Branch, Red Bank and Freehold. The Rediker brothers also owned or operated numerous venues in and around Asbury Park


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HARP TONGS
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 plus -

BOB OAKES
 and the
SULTANS
 YOU GOTTA ROCK & ROLL



with
WJLK'S
LES ROBERTS
M.C.





Post card of Frankie & Lymon & Teenagers with Georgie Hudson.
Hudson got his radio start in Asbury Park.
Courtesy of the Paul Ressler Archives

including Convention Hall, which they leased from the city from 1946 to 1956. Past entertainers there were mostly big bands and other "Pop" acts. The R&B shows like the Easter Monday Balls were likely not the Redikers' shows.

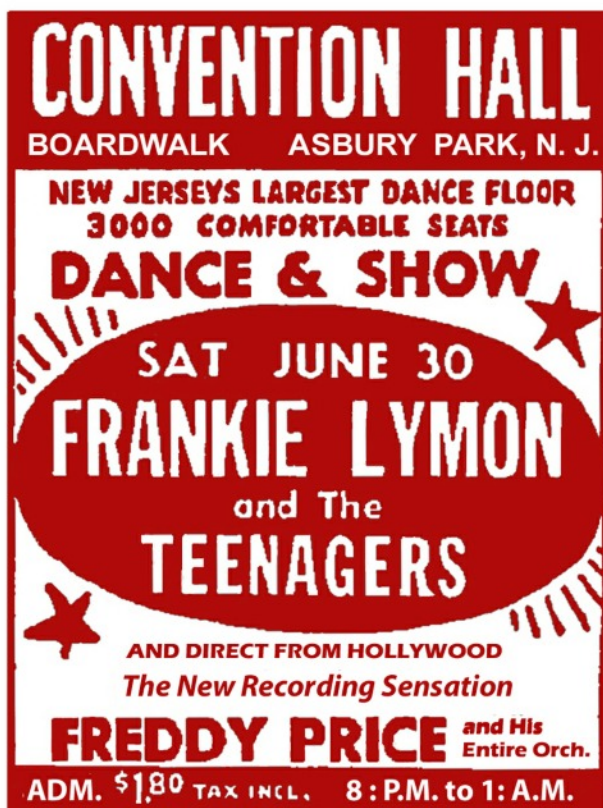
The Rediker brothers booked Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers to headline a dance and concert at Convention Hall on June 30, 1956. Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers had risen to the top of the entertainment field in a very short period of time. Their debut record, "Why Do Fools Fall In Love" was recorded the first week of December, 1955. It first hit the national R&B Charts in February 1956, soon moving to #1. By March it had crossed over onto the Pop Charts where it would reach #6. Led by charismatic 13-year-old Frankie Lymon, the Teenagers had it all - the catchy songs, the great harmony and choreography taught by dance legend Cholly Adkins. Most of all, they had personality. Teenagers across the country, both black and white identified with them. If Frankie Lymon could make it big, why couldn't they?

Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers had just wrapped up a 47-date bus tour, "The Biggest Rock 'n' Roll Show of 1956," on June 5. That tour package had also included Bill Haley & Comets, the Platters, Bo Diddley, the Drifters, LaVern Baker, Clyde McPhatter, Big Joe Turner, Red Prysock, Shirley & Lee, Roy Hamilton, the Five Keys and the Turbans.

Teenagers' Jimmy Merchant explained that before the tour started up again in the Fall, the Teenagers accepted some individual gigs.

Opening for the Teenagers at Convention Hall would be the Freddy Price Orchestra, a white big band. Newspapers said the Freddy Price Orchestra was straight out of Hollywood.

Advertisements said the event would run from 8 PM to 1 AM. It was obvious from the beginning that Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers would draw a big crowd. As the audience began filing in, it would soon reach more than 2,700 youngsters. Convention Hall could hold that many as there were few seats. Attendees mostly stood on the Convention Hall



floor, as was customary for dances. The audience was a mix of black and white youth, many of whom had come from as far away as Newark and Philadelphia.

Future Superior Court Judge. Ira Kreizman, was working the concession stand that night. The then 15-year-old, was the nephew of the Rediker brothers and was selling orangeade for 25 cents a glass, right on the Convention Hall floor.

The youngsters were not there to see the Freddy Price Orchestra and as the night wore on, they became more and more unruly. From 8 o'clock on they waited to see the Teenagers. Most reports have the Teenagers coming on just before 11 PM.

As Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers bounded onto the stage, the audience surged forward to get a better look. "It got more crowded and more crowded," recalled Ira. "And people started pushing toward the front. And one thing led to another. You know, 'Don't push me.' And pretty soon they started brawling."

The Redikers had hired five reserve policemen as security that night. On the surface, five security officers for 2700

youngsters seems thin, but no one was expecting any trouble.

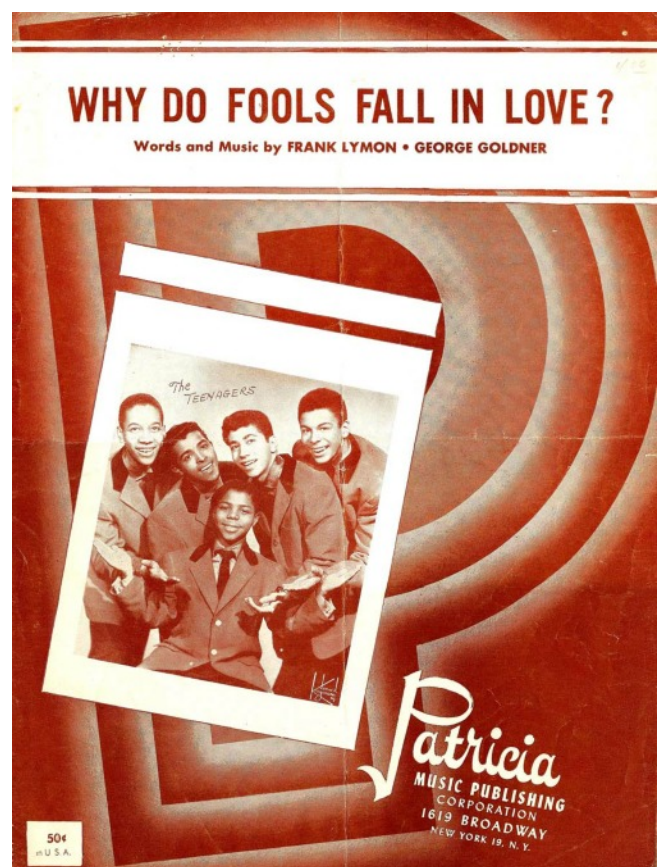
Just as the Teenagers broke into their introductory song, the first fight broke out. The Redikers ordered the doors to Convention Hall closed so no one else could get in and security stopped the concert to break up the fight.

With order restored, Frankie & the Teenagers started into their second song. But, more fights broke out, this time near the concession stand.

The concert was again stopped mid-song. A call was sent out for more police at 11:06 PM. A decision was made to clear the hall, but not until more police arrived. By then it seemed like all hell had broken loose.

"I guy came up to me and said, 'Do you have any napkins?', recalled Ira Kreizman. "I said, 'No, we just have drinks.' He said, 'I've been stabbed.' He was bleeding. He had his pants partly down and he was bleeding. We said, 'It's a good time for us to be leaving.' Ira and the Rediker brothers father, Jacob Rediker, grabbed the cash box and headed for the exit.

A call went out for all available Asbury Park police officers. First on the scene were Sergeant Joseph Friedland along with Sergeant



Thomas Smith (the force's only black detective) and Patrolmen David Cienski and Sal Strano. They managed to get the fighting under control in the hall. But shortly before midnight, police ordered Convention Hall cleared. As the crowd spilled out into the arcade and boardwalk, the fighting began anew.

"The promenade around Convention Hall used to have rocking chairs," remembered Ira. "Like the old straw rocking chairs. People used to sit out there and enjoy the ocean breezes. But [the rioters] took those rocking chairs, knocked the rockers off and used them as clubs. They were swinging these clubs that were about four feet long. It was really wild. Fights were breaking out all over."

As 2,700 angry young men and women stormed onto the boardwalk from their canceled concert, they ran into 75,000 attendees of a VFW convention who had just finished watching their 4th of July parade. Overwhelmed, the four police officers radioed headquarters for back up. With no more officers on duty that night, headquarters Sergeant James Leone put out an urgent call for police officers county wide to help quell the fighting. Within minutes, police arrived from Red Bank to Point Pleasant. Military police from Fort Monmouth and State Police from the Shrewsbury barracks also heeded the call.

By then fighting had spread onto Ocean Avenue and beyond. Police took up positions along Ocean Avenue, using nightsticks when necessary, to keep the crowds moving. Traffic was rerouted. Roving cars filled with teenagers from the concert shattered a few windows including the plate glass window of the Woolworth Five and Dime store on Cookman Avenue. Police even considered calling firemen to turn their hoses on the crowds but relative calm was restored before that was necessary.

Meanwhile, back inside Convention Hall, Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers were ushered off the stage and toward the dressing rooms as soon as the fighting began.

James Pleasant, Convention Hall custodian, was on the stage when the fighting began. "It seemed spontaneous," he said. "The Teenagers had just started their second number and suddenly the fists started flying." Pleasant



Tim Hauser and Charlie Horner, 2009
From the Classic Urban Harmony Archives

said youngsters frightened by the fighting tried to climb on stage to get out of the way.

One of the youngsters who climbed onto the stage to avoid the fighting was Tim Hauser, future singer with the doo wop group the Criteria and founder of the vocalese group, Manhattan Transfer.

Timothy DuPron Hauser was born December 12, 1941 in Troy, NY, but moved with his family to the Wanamassa section of Ocean Township near Asbury Park area when he was seven. As a fifteen-year-old, Tim attended the Frankie Lymon concert at Convention Hall with some friends.

"We heard the bottles break and everybody dispersed," Tim recalled. Separated from his friends, Tim crawled onto the stage to avoid the fighting. Tim knew his way around Convention Hall from previous visits there with Boy Scouts Jamborees. He knew he could escape the back of the stage. But in the wings he met a confused Frankie Lymon.

"This kid comes over to me with makeup in his hand and it was Frankie Lymon," recalled Tim Hauser. "He asked, 'Do you know where the dressing rooms are?' And I did."

Tim led Frankie Lymon to the dressing room where the other Teenagers had already retreated. He was invited in and sat on the dressing room floor while the Teenagers rehearsed "I Promise To Remember" acappella.

"It was like a lightning bolt from God saying this is where you're going," said Tim.

"This is what you're going to do." That encounter would steer Tim Hauser to a lifetime of singing.

Outside, the disturbance would go on past 1:30 in the morning, before being mostly brought under control. When all said and done, 25 were reported hurt but only 3 people needed to be taken to the hospital. Of those, only one, stabbing victim Andrew Lewis of Red Bank was admitted. Needing an operation for a punctured intestine, Lewis did eventually recover. Of the 200 involved in the "riot," only ten were detained by police. Of those, four were found innocent, four let go with a stern warning and one fined \$100 for disorderly conduct. Only one youth was charged with inciting a riot, caught swinging one of the rocking chair legs. Later, four other youths were indicted on assault charges but the person who assaulted Andrew Lewis with a knife was never caught.

In the end, property damage was negligible. No more than a couple Convention Hall rocking chairs were broken and the building itself was not defaced. The police issued a statement that blamed the riot on "cold beer and hot music". While no alcoholic beverages were sold at Convention Hall, the police found plenty of empty beer cans in the hall when it was over.

News of the "Asbury Park Riot" quickly spread across the country. Newspapers in other cities read into the disturbance what they wanted to believe. Asbury police were quick to say this was not a race riot. Black youth were fighting black youth, whites were fighting whites and whites were fighting blacks. Yet southern cities that were still segregated (and some northern city papers) tried to turn this into a racial conflict.

"White, Negro Youths Clash During Dance" proclaimed a Tampa Bay newspaper. "Race Riot Hits New Jersey Park" screamed the headline of a Mississippi newspaper. "Race Fight Injures 28; 25 Arrested" blared page one of a Louisiana newspaper. Even a paper in Salem, OR, headlined "Teen-Age Race Riots Hurt 28 In New Jersey" and a Syracuse, NY, newspaper announced "Youths Trigger Riot of Races At Asbury Park".

So, if race was not to blame for the riot, it must have been the music! Especially when a

week later, a similar riot occurred at a jam packed Rock 'N' Roll dance in San Jose, CA. [*In eerie similarity to the Asbury Park Riot, the San Jose Riot started with a thrown beer bottle in an overcrowded venue with 2500 youth.*]

Fear of Rock & Roll now gripped many municipalities across the country. A week-and-a-half after the Asbury Park Riot, officials in Jersey City, NJ, refused to allow a Rock & Roll concert to proceed. The concert, billed as "Rock 'n' Roll Under the Stars" with Bill Haley & the Comets was slated for the 24,000 seat Roosevelt Stadium four days later. Big band leader, Paul Whiteman, who'd been scheduled to emcee the event tried meekly to defend the music, saying it was just a fad that wouldn't last. Jersey City officials cited Asbury Park as one of the reasons for canceling the event.

The next day, July 11, 1956, the City of Asbury Park banned Rock & Roll from the beachfront music venues, including Convention Hall and the Casino. In a meeting with City Council, Acting Mayor Roland J. Hines decided that city officials will screen future dance programming at the boardwalk halls to prevent a repetition of the June 30 mass fighting. Rock & Roll music was considered too "over-stimulating" for the area's youth.

Mayor Hines said he'd been at Convention Hall on the night of the fighting but left just as Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers began to sing. "When they started singing, Hines said, "I watched some of the kids. They just seemed to lose control of themselves." Citing the San Jose Riot and the banning of Rock & Roll in Jersey City, he added, "The situation we had down there is almost national. Obviously it's a common thing. Council is going to be very careful not to rent to any group that will give us trouble.... The city will screen out Rock & Roll and the rest of this hot music that seems to stir the kids up so much."

While technically, Asbury Park's ban on Rock & Roll only pertained to the beachfront Casino and Convention Hall (and most likely to the Paramount Theatre) newspapers around the country ran headlines like "New Jersey Town Bans Rock 'N' Roll After Dance Riot." Thus Asbury Park became known, temporarily at least, as the "city that banned Rock & Roll".

On the beachfront, for a while, the ban held. A reporter asked New Jersey Governor Robert Meyner if he thought it was wise for municipal officials to ban Rock & Roll concerts. Governor Meyner said he thought it was a municipal problem; that such concerts could be alright with supervision but without adequate supervision there'd be trouble. Asked if he'd ever heard Rock & Roll, the governor replied, "I've heard by radio and television some of this music, but of course, it doesn't appeal to me. Maybe that's because I'm considered mature."

No more major dances were scheduled for the Casino or Convention Hall for the rest of 1956. In planning for 1957, the Rediker brothers mostly played it safe with big bands and pop singers. Scheduled for Convention Hall in 1957 were Duke Ellington, Joni James, Lionel Hampton, the Hilltoppers and the Four Aces. Did they book any Rock N' Roll singers in 1957? Well, yes, but they picked only the safest, most refined [meaning white] groups like the Everly Brothers and the Canadian cover group, the Diamonds.

But in venues beyond the beachfront area, Rock & Roll music continued to thrive. On February 10, 1957, the Savoy Theatre on Mattison Avenue in downtown Asbury Park, featured one of the wildest Rock & Roll shows in the country. For one day only (three shows), they welcomed in Little Richard and his band, the Cadillacs, the Cleftones, Jerry Dorn, the Pells and Harriet Kay. In little more than the past year, Little Richard has scored eight R&B Chart Top Ten records in a row, including "Tutti-Frutti," "Long Tall Sally," "Slippin' And Slidin'," "Rip It Up," "Ready Teddy," "Heeey Jeebies," "She's Got It," and "The Girl Can't Help It." If Little Richard couldn't whip young teenagers into over-stimulation, what would? On top of that you had the fast stepping R&B group, the Cadillacs and more. Opening for this show was the local Asbury Park West Side vocal group, the Mar-Keys, featuring a young Lenny Welch. According to Lenny, there were no fights after that concert,

And across the tracks along Springwood Avenue, the ban on Rock & Roll meant nothing. And it would be the West Side's Arthur Morris who would bring Rock & Roll back to Convention Hall by 1960. Read more in our

forth coming book, *Springwood Avenue Harmony: The Unique Musical Heritage of Asbury Park's West Side (1880 - 1980).*

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