

# Dick Clark, longtime host of American Bandstand, dead at 82

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Veteran American broadcaster and media mogul Dick Clark died April 18 at the age of 82. As host of the famous teen dance show *American Bandstand*, along with a number of other programs, including his annual New Year's Eve celebration *New Year's Rockin' Eve*, Clark was a fixture on the pop culture landscape for at least six decades. A stroke in 2004, which left his speech impaired, had limited Clark's ability to work in recent years, but he continued to appear on the annual New Year's Eve celebration.

The US media is currently and stupidly engaging in the type of mythmaking about Clark that one might expect. He was a "pioneer," an "icon," a man whose "style changed America," and so on. On the other hand, it is not necessary merely to say "B" where the media says "A." As much as possible, it is useful to try and arrive at the more complex reality.

Clark was born Richard Wagstaff Clark on November 30, 1929 in Bronxville, New York and raised in nearby Mount Vernon (both suburbs of New York City). Clark developed a love for radio as a child and by the time he was a teenager he was working in the mailroom and eventually as a weather reporter at the radio station where his father worked as a sales manager.

His time at Syracuse University in upstate New York, where he majored in advertising, gave him more broadcasting experience on campus radio. After working jobs in radio through the 1940s and early 1950s, Clark would make the move to television by the mid-1950s and begin his decades-long run on the show for which he is best remembered.

*American Bandstand* had first aired on local Philadelphia TV station WFIL in 1952. Initially hosted by Bob Horn, the show featured a teenage audience

dancing to the popular records of the day, with guest musicians also coming to perform. Clark took over as host in 1956 and oversaw the show as it grew from a local Philadelphia broadcast into a nationally televised hit.

The show featured a who's who of performers over the years, providing many artists with their first exposure on national television. Clark's easy-going style was a success with audiences, and while his brief interviews with guest musicians were never terribly penetrating, they often produced informal and somewhat candid interactions with the young artists who appeared. (For example, this interview with the Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys in 1964.)

Moreover, unless Clark was a first-rate actor, he seemed to actually have enjoyed the music, as well as his audience members, whose ratings of the songs, on a scale "from 35 to 98," are storied.

Much has been written about *Bandstand's* influence on popular culture and, in particular, its breaking down of racial barriers. To Clark's credit, *Bandstand* regularly featured African-American musicians, including leading Motown stars such as Smokey Robinson and Marvin Gaye.

However, Clark was apparently given to exaggerating the show's efforts to undermine segregation, insisting that the show was integrated from the moment he became the host. In reality, while many African-American musicians did appear, the in-studio audience and dancers would remain segregated until the mid-1960s when the show relocated from Philadelphia to Los Angeles and by which time the Civil Rights movement had already accomplished a great deal.

While Clark appeared to have a genuine admiration

for the musicians who appeared on his show, as well as a certain regard for his teenage audience, he was first and foremost a businessman. The success of *Bandstand* and Clark's company, Dick Clark Productions, at that time was dependent upon a certain conformity with official life and an undoubted ruthlessness in business.

The start of Clark's career and the years in which he made his initial fortune coincided with the postwar economic boom, during which time a large section of working class youth saw a substantial increase in their living standards. Many young people found themselves with a little money in their pockets for the first time. New opportunities had opened up to them.

Rock 'n' roll also appeared during this period, bringing together a number of popular strands, and reflective of real life and the life of the poorer classes in particular. Inevitably and rapidly, the new music became a multi-billion-dollar business on which enormous pressure was brought to bear.

The music and its teenage fans also presented an opportunity to the postwar entrepreneur. Clark packaged and marketed the music, presenting the musical and cultural phenomenon as safe and clean-cut as possible in the face of right-wing opposition to its alleged corrupting and even "communistic" influence. A significant number of relatively lightweight and "acceptable" musicians appeared on *American Bandstand* along with more serious figures.

In an article on his death, the *Washington Post* carried a revealing quote from an interview Clark once gave to *Rolling Stone*. "I'm not gonna sit here and tell you I did this solely to keep music alive," Clark said. His main interest, rather, was to "perpetuate my own career, first and foremost, and secondly the music."

"My business is teenagers," Clark said on another occasion, in a quote that has appeared in numerous tributes since his death. "I don't set trends. I just find out what they are and exploit them."

In 1960, by which time he was a millionaire associated with some 33 corporations within the music and entertainment industry, Clark was called to testify during the US Senate's investigation into "payola," the music industry's practice of bribing disc jockeys and other media figures to promote and favor certain recordings. A number of prominent figures were caught up in the payola scandal, including famed disc jockey Alan Freed, who was a significant champion of rock

'n' roll in its earliest years. Freed's reputation was destroyed by the scandal.

Clark, who gave his full cooperation to Senate investigators, was provided a stamp of approval by the investigating committee and never charged with any crimes. He agreed to drop any of his companies and financial holdings considered to be a conflict of interest.

In the decades that followed, Clark would continue to find financial success and remain popular with audiences. In addition to *American Bandstand*, which he hosted until the show ended its run in 1989, Clark could be found hosting game shows, the long-running *Rock, Roll and Remember* radio show and his annual New Year's eve specials which began in 1972. Clark also founded and produced the annual American Music Awards shows beginning in 1973. At one point in the 1980s, Clark was host of three different shows on three different television networks.

At the time of his death, Clark reportedly left behind a fortune worth hundreds of millions of dollars.



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