

AMERICA'S OLDEST TEENAGER TALKS MUSIC WITH ATOMIC


DICK CLARK

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His voice comes into range before you actually see him—that warm, energetic voice that greeted you every Saturday morning when you were a kid. Like the voice of a favorite uncle who takes you to the movies and lets you get both popcorn and Junior Mints. And then he's right there next to you—shorter than you expected, but tan and beaming. You notice the hair is real and his all-American features are not too much changed by the passing years. The jowls droop a little, and there are bags under his eyes, but you'd guess him a decade younger than 70. As he winks and shakes your hand, flashing the smile television viewers have known for half a century, you're thinking you'd rather invite him for a game of golf than an interview. He looks like he'd be fun to hang out with.

But Dick Clark is on a tight schedule. He's tub-thumping for a health drink called Nu-Vim®, and in 30 minutes he needs to introduce Gary “U.S.” Bonds on the outdoor stage in front of the CBS Blackrock Building in midtown Manhattan. The event is being marketed as a reunion for some of the original members of *American Bandstand*, the show Clark hosted from 1956 to 1989. Several grey-haired dancers sporting business suits and name tags are gathered to one side of the stage, while a small group of young, vintage-clad jitterbuggers congregate on the opposite end. Clark himself is surrounded by a gaggle of staff members—his wife, Kari, among them—who make sure he doesn't dally too long. America's oldest living teenager may still be youthful, but he hasn't got time to waste.

So what does Clark think about this *Bandstand* reunion, and the whole revival of classic American music, from big band swing to early rock-and-roll?

“What you're seeing is that the new generation is discovering a lot of things they never knew—game shows and television, swing music and dance—it's terrific,” he says enthusiastically. “Good stuff never goes away, it's just rediscovered. It's a shame sometimes good parts of our world disappear because it's not hip to stay there. The audience will drift away, but the talent stays there, the great sounds will stay there.”

Clark admits that he's a nostalgia buff himself—he has every copy of *LIFE* magazine ever published, and more than 4,000 pieces of rock memorabilia in his personal collection. Still, he says, “Nostalgia is wonderful...but we can't live back there. You've got to dip in, dip out, and then get with today and move on to the future, because obviously that's where things will happen. I've tried to stay current all my life.”

Richard W. Clark was born November 30, 1929, in Mt. Vernon, New York. He entered the music business at 17 as a sales manager for a radio station in upstate New York, and in 1952, he began doing a radio show called “Caravan of Music” at WFIL in Philadelphia. The station's TV affiliate had a show oriented to teenagers called *Bandstand*, which was hosted by Bob Horn. Clark was named the new host in July 1956 after Horn became embroiled in a sex scandal, and helped take the show national within a year's time. Thus began one of the longest runs for a television program in history.

Since then, Clark has come to dominate the broadcast entertainment industry. In 1993, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Dick Clark Productions puts out more than a dozen nationally-televised award shows every year, including the American Music Awards,

Daytime Emmy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, and the Academy of Country Music Awards. The company also oversees syndicated programs like *Donny and Marie* and *Your Big Break*. His communications venture does marketing and PR for countless entertainment properties, and his Web site offers streaming audio clips of new pop and alternative music groups. And then, of course, there's *Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve*, an annual tradition for thousands of unmarried men and women from coast-to-coast.

His media empire is valued at \$250 million, and yet, despite all of his accomplishments, he will be forever remembered as the host of *American Bandstand*. Does that ever bother him?

“It's terrific. That's the one [achievement] I would love to be remembered by,” he says. He notes that the show survived four generations of changing musical tastes, from early rock-and-roll to Motown, folk rock, disco, and New Wave. “It was such an extraordinary experience. I was always older than the kids. When I started, I was about 10 or 11 years older than they were. It was such an extraordinary experience to be jammed into their world and have to be reasonably familiar with it and watch them. I'm sure it's a lot like a school teacher—you're in a world where you're a fish out of water but part of the scene.”

“I remember how innocent we all were,” adds Clark. “The fact that we had a very uncomplicated society. It was a beginning of a whole new youth culture. It was a major turning point in our lives and certainly in television.” Today, he says, the music industry is dominated by a small elite who put their money where the action is. “It becomes very difficult [for an artist] to break through the mess. The music channels play the most popular thing. It's a mass medium, even though it's going to a very small, targeted, young female audience. [Music industry executives] will deny that. They'll say it's older and wider—but the problem is that it's so young.”

Clark notes that back when he started in the music industry, there were thousands of independently owned radio stations, and DJs were free to play their own selections.

“There was [only] our show for television and *The Ed Sullivan Show*, which cherry-picked off a couple of notables every now and then. But for the most part, promotion was very simple. You loaded the records in the trunk of a car and brought them to the radio stations and they would play it.” Becoming a recognized artist wasn't necessarily easier, he says, but it was simpler back then. “There were fewer layers you had to go through. A disc jockey in those days had the benefit of being able to play whatever he felt like. Now it's all determined by some central office in a city far away and sent out to their 300 affiliates, and they've all got to do the same thing. So you've got to somehow ingratiate yourself to the one person that's making the decision in that unnamed city. Your odds are considerably diminished.”

Yet as much as Clark is nostalgic for a simpler time, he holds firm to the idea that you have to stay in the present. “I'm intelligent enough to realize that we can't go backward. I realize that ATOMIC deals with the good old days. And that's the way we ought to revere them, as the ‘good old days.’ But you've got to live for today.”

Like his contemporaries, Clark grew up listening to big band music, but today his record collection includes



every genre under the sun, from pop to jazz to Brazilian, R&B, rock-and-roll, and country. "I'd be dishonest if I told you I loved everything that I heard today or yesterday. You always have certain favorites. For the most part, music is more interesting and more diverse than it's ever been," he says.

So what's next for one of the most powerful and recognized personalities in broadcasting? More of the same, says Clark, who plans to continue expanding his Web presence and looking for new entertainment projects. What's most important to him is that he stays in the game.

"I've been very fortunate—this is my 53rd year doing what I love," he says. "Somehow or other, I've been able to maintain. When people ask what I'm most proud of, that's it: being able to hang in there and not let the bad guys get you down." ♦