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## Review: 'Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story' at Bucks County Playhouse



Bob Ari, Alan Campbell, and Company. Photo by Joan Marcus.

Who was the first rock and roller? You could say it was Elvis Presley, the first rock and roll superstar. Or Bill Haley, the first rocker to have a number one hit. Or maybe it was Ray Charles, or Fats Domino, or one of dozens of other musical pioneers.

But there are some who would say it was Alan Freed, the disc jockey who is credited with coining the term "rock and roll" in the mid-1950s and popularizing the music of black singers with white teenagers. Yet while Elvis, Fats and the others became the idols of millions, Freed – a man with weaknesses for alcohol, women, and petty corruption – quickly sank into obscurity. By 1960 the FBI investigation into the payola scandal effectively ended his career, and a few years after that he basically drank himself to death.

Freed was a complicated, intriguing figure, and Bucks County Playhouse's new musical *Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story* charts his fascinating rise and fall.

*Rock and Roll Man* is at its best when it spotlights the music that Freed embraced. The show is filled with performers doing impressions of some of the biggest stars of early rock, and most of these impersonators do an excellent job. Standouts include big-voiced Soara-Joye Ross as LaVern Baker; Matthew Sean Morgan, who plays both a focused Chuck Berry and the wonderfully weird Screamin' Jay Hawkins; and John Dewey, reprising his title role from BCP's *Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story*. There's also a four-member quartet (including veterans of The Drifters and other legendary groups) that does dynamic versions of early vocal harmony classics like "Yakety Yak" and "Get a Job." Best of all is Richard Crandle, who does a hilarious and flamboyant version of Little Richard. They're all backed by a five-piece band, led by Dave Keyes, that does justice to the music.



Alan Campbell, Richard Crandle, and George Wendt. Photo by Joan Marcus.

When we're not watching these fine recreations of timeless hits, though, *Rock and Roll Man* is a mixed bag. Alan Campbell is terrific in the title role – he's lively and charming, sings like a dream, and conveys Freed's self-destructive impulses in a convincing and affecting way. And the book by Gary Kupper, Larry Marshak and Rose Caiola never lets Freed off the hook for his faults, notably in a scene that discusses how Freed took songwriting credits on songs he hadn't written (like Berry's "Maybellene"). But the book is dominated by a silly dream sequence/flashback structure in which a dying Freed imagines himself on trial for his crimes against society – with Little Richard as his defense attorney. There's also hokey, clichéd dialogue that the skilled cast can't overcome: when Freed asks if the trial is real, FBI Chief J. Edgar Hoover – played with a gruff, game-for-anything attitude by George Wendt – responds "It's a dream, Freed, and I'm your worst nightmare." Lines like that make it hard to take Freed's plight seriously.

There are also several original songs written by Kupper. The best is the energetic "Destiny," which approximates the flavor of early R&B. But most of the new songs are generic ballads like "Rock and Roll Lullaby" and "Everyone Knew It" which show the softer sides of characters like Freed and his first wife Betty (an underused Whitney Bashor) but don't fit the tenor of the show and undercut the drama. The lyrics on these new songs also use meter inconsistently, sometimes cramming extra syllables into lines awkwardly.



Melissa van der Schyff, Alan Campbell, and Heather Parcells. Photo by Joan Marcus.

Bob Ari makes a strong mark in two very different roles – Leo Mintz, the friendly record store owner who helps Freed get his start, and Morris Levy, the brusque record executive who pulls Freed into the world of organized crime. Heather Parcells makes a sexy first impression as Freed’s second wife Jackie (singing and dancing the cha cha to “Teach Me Tonight”), then, sadly, disappears for most of Act Two, just when the show needs her energy.

Rock and Roll Man is a huge, complicated undertaking, and director Randal Myler paces the show well. He’s helped greatly by Jen Caprio’s period costumes, Tim Mackabee’s efficient set design, Rui Rita’s glitzy lighting and Christopher Ash’s clever animated projections, all of which do a good job of establishing the proper 1950s ambiance. Brian Reeder’s choreography makes the most of a limited playing area, but makes up for it with lots of jitterbugging and splits from the spirited ensemble. As long as the hits keep coming, Rock and Roll Man is fun. But it works better as a revue than as a biography. Let’s hope the writers continue to craft the show and help it to find the right balance.

Running Time: Two hours and 30 minutes, including an intermission.

***Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story*** plays through October 1, 2017 at the Bucks County Playhouse – 70 South Main Street, in New Hope, PA. For tickets, call the box office at (215) 862-2121, or purchase them [online](#).