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Rock and Roll Man Explores Alan Freed's Legacy

By

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Alan Freed

Lance Freed will never forget the conversation.

He'd built quite a legacy of his own in the music industry in the decades following his famous father's 1965 death from liver disease. A friend asked if he'd host an event for a woman who was a true pioneer in her own right.

That woman saw the Freed name and wondered if there was a connection.

"We were leaving the house when she asked, 'Are you related to him?'" the 70-year-old Freed recalled. "I said 'Yes.'"

That woman was Rosa Parks, whom he was about to accompany to a nearby synagogue where she'd be speaking.

"She said, 'You know I never heard his broadcasts or saw his movies, but I was very much aware of him,'" Freed said. "'In many ways, he was a hero to us. Through his music, he broke down barriers of prejudice and helped desegregate the races at a very important time. We owe him a debt of gratitude.'"

You won't hear that story in *Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story*, which continues its world-premiere run at the Bucks County Playhouse through Oct. 1. But it demonstrates the impact Freed, who's credited in most circles with coining the term "rock 'n' roll," had not only on music, but society.



Freed, Alan Campbell and stepsister Sieglinde Freed | Photo provided

The production features Tony Award nominee Alan Campbell as Freed and George Wendt, best known as Norm from *Cheers*, as former FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. It focuses on Freed's groundbreaking career as a DJ in the 1950s, then explores the subsequent FBI investigation into the payoffs he allegedly received from record companies.

For Lance Freed, who was only 16 when his father died, seeing the play's creation was cathartic.

"I've been to a couple of readings and seen the play progress and become a play, not just a litany of facts and how things unfolded," Freed said. "It also embodies the idea of his embracing and caring about people, which was missing before.

"Watching it, I was trying to imagine my father sitting next to me and thinking how he'd react. He would be very happy. In a sense, it's vindication. The way things ended with his career was a tragedy."

It's been nearly 70 years since Alan Freed started impacting the music industry and 65 years since his Moondog Coronation Ball packed Cleveland Arena with 25,000 fans at what is generally considered the first rock 'n' roll concert.

From there, he took his act to Broadway on WINS AM 1010, which syndicated his show nationwide. Freed's popularity soared, and he started being featured in movies, among them *Rock Around the Clock* with Bill Haley & His Comets, *Don't Knock the Rock* with Little Richard and *Rock, Rock, Rock!* with Chuck Berry.



Lance Freed and actor Bob Ari | Photo provided

Tagged "the undisputed king of radio programming" by *Billboard* magazine, the son of a Russian-Jewish immigrant father and an Irish mother who raised him Christian, Freed was at the height of his career when he fell victim to the late 1950s Payola scandal.

He was among those accused of taking gifts and other kickbacks from record companies to play their music, which resulted in the Hoover-led FBI investigations.

That essentially killed his career, as Freed was fired from WINS and later lost another radio job, as well as one on television. Called before a 1960 congressional subcommittee, Freed detailed his fees as a "consultant" for various record companies, but insisted it never influenced his choice of what to play.

In 1963, his life deteriorating while living in Los Angeles, Freed pleaded guilty to two counts of commercial bribery; he was fined \$300 and given a suspended sentence. Drinking heavily and in debt, his life spiraled out of control. He was only 43 when he died on New Year's Day 1965.

"I was ill-equipped to deal with his death," said Lance Freed, who picked up the Jewish mantle his father dropped, marrying a Jewish woman and later convincing his teenage daughter, Hannah, to study for her Bat Mitzvah by agreeing to join her and become a Bar Mitzvah himself. "But I'm proud with what they've done with this play.

"It's a story most people are astonished to hear. They have no idea how music got its name or about the Moondog Coronation Ball. He was the midwife at the birth of rock 'n' roll."

Parks, a woman who knew something about being in an unprecedented time in history, could appreciate it.

"She understood who he was," Freed said. "She knew he never set out to become a civil rights advocate. He just happened to be dealing with artists of color when it was unpopular to do so."