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## 'Rock and Roll Man' at Bucks County: Cast rocks, show reels



Alan Campbell (center) and cast in "Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story" at the Bucks County Playhouse.

By John Timpane

*Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story*, world-premiering through Oct. 1 at Bucks County Playhouse, still needs to get licked into shape, but it's an entertaining, talent-packed two hours-plus. Whatever its shortcomings, it's worth seeing for the cast — and the story.

Alan Freed was a music crazy who grew up with swing in the 1940s, discovered rhythm and blues, and as a 1950s DJ worked that music into radio playlists and listeners' ears. While he did not invent the term *rock and roll* (longtime African American parlance for rambunctious sex), he did coin it as a commercial brand, a pop-culture movement that left its stamp on music and society.

Broadway guy Alan Campbell plays Freed as a grownup kid, an innocent who loses his innocence yet doesn't grasp his own ruin until too late. The part is underwritten, going easy on the dark side: We see the failed husband and father but not the shark. Campbell's Freed does have gusto. While a DJ in Cleveland, he sees the races dancing together to the new music at a local record store, and, my, his wide-eyed glimpse of an America that could be. He also hears stardom call, and soon it's goodbye, Cleveland, and hello, New York.

The sets (Tim Mackabee) and lighting (Rui Rita) are eloquent, nicely managing dreamscapes and time-flashes. And there's a ton of great tunes. My goodness, the performances. Matthew Sean Morgan

inhabits both Chuck Berry and Screamin' Jay Hawkins. James Scheider is a box-bangin' Jerry Lee Lewis, William Louis Bailey is a superb Frankie Lymon, and John Dewey reprises his Buddy Holly from *The Buddy Holly Story*. The stylish Soara-Joye Ross nails LaVern Baker, and Dr. Eric B. Turner does a note-perfect Fats Domino.

The show-stealer has to be Richard Crandle as Little Richard, resplendent in his gold lamé suit; in a side-splitting TV commercial for Dairy Queen, he teaches race relations via vanilla and chocolate soft-serve. And hurray for the Quartet, comprising Turner, Jerome Jackson (a member of the real Drifters since 1991!), A.J. Davis, and Early Clover: They do everyone from Billy Ward and His Dominoes to the Silhouettes to the Platters, trading lead vocals and dance routines with aplomb.

Original tunes mix with past greats, a big risk, and one that fails. This becomes clearest in the far-too-long second act. Freed, now king of the world, takes his rock-and-roll show across America, and it's great. But there's also Freed's descent into the payola scandal and organized crime. George Wendt (the Norm of *Cheers*) plays a growling, dogged J. Edgar Hoover in Freed's last nightmare, chasing him down.

It's all too much for the script. Freed's life crashes, and at the end we get five long, soft bye-bye numbers (three originals, one of which, "Rock and Roll Lullaby," is the only good one), and then "Rock and Roll Man," a reverential anthem that tries too hard to credit Freed with seeing the future America.

Freed was a kind of visionary — but he was also an exploitation artist, and this musical might do better to embrace that and let the gritty contradictions grate. Alan Freed was an American tragedy. *Rock and Roll Man* gives us much of that flavor, but it will need some trimming and reworking to give us both the rock and roll and the man.

*Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story*. Through Oct. 1 at Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope. Tickets: \$40-\$85. Information: [bcptheater.org](http://bcptheater.org), 215-862-2121.