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‘Rock ‘n Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story’ is rockin’ the house at Bucks County Playhouse



PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS Alan Campbell and the cast. Alan Campbell and the cast.

By Frank Burd For Digital First Media

Like others, I go to be entertained. But every so often, a show that is filled with good music and a good story, gives me more — it gives me an understanding of a person or a time in the world that I knew little about. “Rock ‘n Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story,” making it’s world debut at Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, has it all. Full of life, featuring an incredibly talented ensemble, it is fascinatingly informative, and it is a winner. If I assigned stars to a production, out of five, I’d give it a six!

For those who don’t know Alan Freed, he was the disc jockey who promoted a mix of music genres that included R&B (rhythm and blues), jazz, country, and folk, on the stations where he spun the discs. First, calling his show, The Moondog House, he eventually coined the term “rock n’ roll,” from an existing Black song. In fact, that was part of the controversy surrounding Freed. He brought so many fine black musicians into the mainstream of American music, promoting integration through music. Sadly, much of the country wasn’t ready for it in the 1950’s. In fact, a television show of his on ABC was cancelled because one of the Black singers (Frankie Lymon), danced with a White girl.

To present this turbulent time in the music world, the show uses a surrealistic courtroom scenario, with the prosecutor being none other than the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover, a man who led the charge in attempting to bring down Freed. Hoover is played by George Wendt (Cheers fame), and he is perfect as the cold, calculating leader of the "free world" as he sought to destroy anything he viewed as anti-American.

Freed's defense attorney in these dream-like sequences is one of the great musicians he promoted, Little Richard (Tutti Frutti). Richard Crandle, smart, sassy, and talented, is superb as he also provides some of the comic relief. And the veteran actor Bob Ari gives a stellar performance of two characters who were profound influences upon Freed's life.

I can go on and on about the this remarkable group of performers — the quartet, the women in Freed's life, the record store owner in Cleveland (Bob Ari), and of course the actors who played the likes of Chuck Berry, Bill Haley, Jackie Wilson, Jerry Lee Lewis, and others. And then there is Alan Freed himself.

I knew of Alan Freed, who died at the age of 43, but didn't really know him. From the late '40' to the mid 50's, he went from Akron, to Cleveland, to New York City bringing with him an alternative to the traditional pop music of the day. Instead, he created a persona of a newer hipper music. He encouraged huge concerts and dances wherever he went, to play the music he was pushing on his radio stations. He gained fame in New York on WINS, then WNEW radio,

Later on, some of these concerts got so out of control that the police stepped in to shut them down. But it was something else that would eventually bring him down, a charge of payola.

Freed is portrayed by Alan Campbell, a man with a rich resume, but who was so effective as the infamous disc jockey, I will probably always see him in this role. Campbell is so smooth, so seemingly effortless, as he encounters the personal and professional obstacles that stand in his way. He solidifies this strong script by Gary Kupper, Larry Marshak, and Rose Caiola. Add to the mix new music by Kupper and you walk out of Bucks County Playhouse knowing you have something special that is going to have a long life.

Who knows? Like many works in the history of the Playhouse, it may wind up on Broadway. It's certainly worthy of it. I wouldn't be surprised.

Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main Street, New Hope, PA 18938, 215-862-2121, bcptheater.org. The production is on stage through Oct. 1, 2017