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The cast of *Rock and Roll Man: The Alan Freed Story* at Bucks County Playhouse. (Photo: Joan Marcus)

By John Dwyer

I wanted to love this show as much as I did “The Buddy Holly Story.” It was going to have classic rock and roll performed right on stage. It sounded like a great concept and, if the performers were top notch, like they were in “The Buddy Holly Story,” it would be a home run.

But I also expected a potential catch: the protagonist, Alan Freed, is not a performer but a DJ, and the story is not an easy, straightforward tale. None of the major songs are sung by Freed, though he does sing originals by Gary Kupper, who also, along with Larry Marshak and Rose Caila, is responsible for the book. The attempt to interlace the rock score and the story with original songs is not totally successful, for a variety of reasons.

This biographical jukebox musical revolves around Freed, one of the first deejays to play rock and roll on the airwaves. In fact, he coined the phrase “rock and roll” during the early 1950s. Prior to this, it was known as a form of rhythm and blues called “race music.” His influence in promoting the genre is undeniable. But this musical is a chronology of his life on which to hang the songs he popularized. It does not do justice to the man, because it does not sufficiently examine his flaws, it only names them. If you extract the rock and roll numbers sung by an excellent cast, you get a fine show. But if you want to call this a musical, there are problems to address.



Early Clover, Dr. Eric B. Turner, A.J. Davis, George Wendt and Jerome Jackson (Photo: Joan Marcus)

Alan Freed died at the young age of 43 from uremia and cirrhosis due to alcoholism. The play opens just prior to his passing, and he is dreaming about his golden years with the likes of Chuck Berry and the Everly Brothers. He wakes up, talks to his wife, sings an original song called "Playin' Music," and then falls back asleep to dream again. But this time, he dreams about a humongous courtroom, whose bench literally takes up the entire stage. Kudos to the set designer, Tim Mackabee. It is truly amazing.

The case before us is the value of Alan James Freed's life — think Albert Brooks in "Defending Your Life." It's being tried before a judge (Brian Mathis) and the prosecutor is J. Edgar Hoover, and the defense attorney is Little Richard. J. Edgar Hoover is played by the delightfully droll George Wendt, best known to audiences as Norm from "Cheers." Little Richard is played by Richard Crandle.

In a contest of facts presented by J. Edgar and Little Richard, it can be no surprise as to how the facts will tilt. Especially when presented by Crandle's unforgettable performance as an amazingly manic Little Richard.

Another notable performance was given by Dr. Eric B. Turner (an original member of "The Drifters" who was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame), whose soulful, haunting rendition of "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" takes your breath away. And both are joined by "the shake, rattle and roll sounds" of John Dewey from "The Buddy Holly Show" as Buddy Holly, Soara-Joye Ross as LaVern Baker, James Scheider as Jerry Lee Lewis and Matthew Sean Morgan as Chuck Berry.

All of the above gives much to recommend, and I do hope you go to enjoy the music and enjoy the performances. Many performers play multiple roles. Whitney Bashor, for example, plays first wife Betty Lou Been and, later, gives a touching performance as daughter Alana.

But the problem is the storytelling. Even if you take the book as is, without improving it by giving a more thorough examination of Alan Freed, the man, there are problems with the casting of Alan Campbell as Freed and with the songs of Kupper.

Alan Campbell is not a rocker, and this is a rock and roll show. Campbell fits in as a Broadway leading man with a legit voice. If you are not familiar with what is meant by a legit voice, think Gordon McCrae from "Oklahoma" or Alfred Drake in "Kiss Me Kate." And arguably, Mr. Campbell is not given rock and roll to sing. But he should have been.



Alan Cambell as Alan Freed. (Photo: Joan Marcus)

The songs of Kupper sound more like run-of-the-mill Broadway fare than rock and roll. Some are sweet and sincere, some are cute. None of them are memorable, but they do service the story, just not in the right 'rock and roll' genre. There is a disconnect. If Justin Guarini were cast — he is not exactly the right look, but he is the right type — it would have seemed more authentic. Or a current rock voice from the Voice or American Idol would have been appropriate, and there would have been a better natural connection to the material and the genre.

Also, though mentioning his three marriages, inattention to family, alcoholism, payola scandal, wrongfully taking credit for songs by black artists and collecting royalties, none of this was given enough attention in the musical, whose main question remains unanswered: What emotional toll, what demon, possessed Alan Freed to drink himself to death?

The list of wrongdoings was read. The drinks were drunk. And the show was cleverly formatted. But if only one of the issues were examined a bit more thoroughly with Freed grappling more earnestly, this show would be a lot more engaging. The inability to delve into Freed's demons make him seem more like Jerry Mathers as the Beaver being led astray by the Eddie Haskell's of his life. Freed was ironically enslaved by both his good and bad fortune, and in the current show we are not given any emotional reveal as to why. The play, like Freed's life, does service to the music, but has not made this man's life whole.

"Rock and Roll Man" is running at Bucks Count Playhouse through Oct. 1.