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'Rock and Roll Man—The Alan Freed Story' is a toe-tapping history lesson about the culture-changing DJ New Bucks County Playhouse musical is a rockin' good time



AP/AP

Cleveland radio disc jockey Alan Freed, flanked by associates who fought the city of New Haven's ban on his rock and roll revue, are shown just before they entered the county court house, May 7, 1958. At left is Monte Bruce, promoter of the Freed's New Haven revue. Attorney Warren Troob is at right.

By Chuck Darrow

On the surface, the late **Alan Freed** is hardly a sterling subject to lionize in a musical theater production. Freed, who died at age 43 in 1965, was, by all accepted accounts, a philandering alcoholic who had no problem taking credit—primarily financial—for writing hit songs despite a complete lack of involvement in their creation.

But Freed was also the guy who knocked American popular culture permanently off its axis by introducing (but not inventing) the phrase “rock and roll,” which he initially applied to rhythm and blues music made primarily, if not exclusively, by African-American musicians. That led to the first mainstreaming of African-American art into what was then a solidly white culture—a circumstance freighted with historical portent.

As such, he probably is a worthy subject for the Broadway-style treatment. And “Rock and Roll Man—The Alan Freed Story,” which, through Oct. 1, is having its world premiere at New Hope’s Bucks County Playhouse, is a perfectly fine telling of that somewhat sordid, mostly celebratory tale.

The production is animated by a first-rate cast and a solid and attention-holding, if not particularly eloquent, book (by **Gary Kupper**, **Lary Marshak** and **Rose Caiola**). It also boasts a never-dull, hybrid score that incorporates numerous golden oldies (including “Roll Over Beethoven,” “All I Have to Do Is Dream,” “Rock Around the Clock,” “Ain’t That A Shame,” and “Tweedle Dee”) with a handful of original songs (composed by Kupper) that generally succeed in propelling/explaining the story.

The bulk of the play is presented as a dream-hallucination that the physically, emotionally and financially exhausted Freed has in the last hours of his life. He is in that depleted state because he was the most prominent victim of 1959’s federal investigation into “payola,” whereby disc jockeys took cash, gifts and services in exchange for playing certain records.

In the nightmare, he sees himself in a courtroom defending himself against charges he ruined America by giving to its impressionable teenagers that sex-inducing, drug-use-encouraging, race-mixing scourge called “rock and roll.” The word “hallucination” certainly applies here: In his reverie, he conjures FBI icon J. Edgar Hoover as the prosecutor and proto-rocker Little Richard as his defense attorney.

Yes, it sounds silly, but the premise somehow works.