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Boston and "The Big Statement"

On March 28, 1958, Alan Freed kicked off a rock-and-roll package tour with an abbreviated two-day stand at the Brooklyn Paramount. After a short hop to the Hartford State Theater in Connecticut, followed by a brief return to Lowe's Paradise in the Bronx, the show was off on its 37-city circuit. Crisscrossing the United States and venturing into Canada, 68 shows were slated in a span of 45 days!

Freed's tour boasted a trio of headliners—Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, and Buddy Holly & the Crickets. Holly would fill any slot on the bill so long as his act got top dollar. But for more than a month, Alan had been bugged by the ongoing rivalry between Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis. Both wanted to be the tour's closing act. And Berry won the battle of the egos—at least temporarily.

However, after listening to Lewis grumble and gripe about how he was the *real* star of the tour, Freed decided to let the "killer" close the show in Boston. The Boston audience figured to be predominantly white, and Freed knew they would react best to a white star. Hardly a magnanimous act, the gesture was strictly business. Yet it unwittingly contributed to the forthcoming disaster.

The Boston date was scheduled for Saturday, May 3, at the old Boston Arena. "It was located downtown where the dregs of society lived," says Freed's longtime friend and business associate Jack Hooke. "It was in the worst section of Boston..."

"We got into the show and there were police all around us. We didn't pay 'em any mind. We were going to do our show like we'd done in every other city.

Hooke was observing the show from his usual vantage point—from a far corner of the stage. "As happened in every other place, the kids got out of their seats into the aisles. We tried to keep it in line, but at one point a police sergeant was right there on stage with me."

"Hey!," he told Hooke, "The kids are out of line. I'm going to stop this show if they don't get back in their seats!"

Hooke grabbed Freed and said, "Alan, you know how they are in this town. You better get 'em back in their seats or we're gonna have trouble!"

Freed promptly commanded the microphone onstrage. "Alright, listen. Hold it! I have to stop the show for a minute kids. I want everybody back in their seats. The show won't go on unless you all get back in your seats!" That did the trick until it came time for Jerry Lee Lewis to close the show. As the "killer" charged into his maniacal stage act in front of, as well as on top of his piano, flailing away at the keys, all hell broke loose.

"The kids were out of their seats, strong as ever," says Hooke. "And the sergeant was heckling me."

"I'm gonna put on the house lights," he angrily informed Hooke.

"I knew it would make Alan crazy," he continues. He was ready to get Freed onstage again to restore order, but it was too late.

Snapping fingers, the sergeant called out, "House

lights!" As they went on, Jerry Lee Lewis abruptly stopped his act. There was a hush as Freed stormed to the center of the stage.

"Hold it!," he screamed to no one in particular, shooting an annoyed glare in Hooke's direction. "Alright kids, listen! I told you before, you've gotta get back in your seats for the show to go on. Everybody, please go back to your seats!"

"Everybody went back," recalls Hooke, "so Alan said, 'Go!' to Jerry Lewis and the band. 'Lights!," commanded Freed.

"I'm not putting the lights out!," snapped the sergeant.

Freed was livid. "You can't do that! These kids paid three dollars a ticket. You don't go to a theatre to see a show that way!"

"No, those lights are not going out!" replied the sergeant.

It was then, says Hooke, that Freed could no longer contain himself and he made what his friend and associate terms "the big statement."

"Kids, the police won't put out the lights," Alan told his audience. "I guess the police in Boston don't want you to have a good time!" The crowd buzzed defiantly as arena manager Paul Brown anxiously paced in his office.

"He continued the show with the lights on, but he was dying out there," continues Hooke. It was well after midnight when the show closed without further incident. Newspaper accounts reported that Alan mingled with his fans, signing autographs for a half-hour or so outside the Boston Arena. Then, because of the growing crowd, the deejay, his wife Jackie, and Jack Hooke were hustled under protest into a waiting limousine by police.

"We went to the airport and flew to Montreal (for Sunday night's performance)," recalls Hooke. On Monday, the trio flew back to Boston, en route to that night's show in Lewiston, Maine.

"We came into the airport and we looked at the newspaper headlines," says Hooke. "We wanted to die! The headlines were *this high*," he exclaims, holding his hands far enough apart to indicate a full-page.

"RIOT IN BOSTON AT ROCK AND ROLL SHOW"

"We picked up the paper and we read how girls were raped in the bathroom, how kids were cut up, and how there was a big riot outside the place. It was the most unbelievable story I ever saw in my life! We looked at each other and Alan said to me, 'Hooke, is this America? Where are we? What is this!'"

According to a New York Times account, entitled "ROCK AND ROLL STABBING," a nineteen year-old sailor was stabbed by teenaged brawlers milling around the Boston Arena following Freed's show. In all, nine men and six women were roughed up and re-



quired hospital treatment, according to the Times.

Boston newspaper accounts were more sensational, reporting that the fifteen persons were "beat, robbed, and molested." Then, according to the local press, teenage gangs raced through the streets, terrorizing the Roxbury and Back Bay sections of the city.

Tuesday's performance, scheduled for Troy, NY, was promptly cancelled, as was Wednesday's show in Providence and Thursday's in New Haven. Friday's show, scheduled for Trenton, NJ was also wiped out for what was termed the "public's safety."

Meanwhile, Boston police maintained that the attackers in question fled before they could be apprehended. No Boston "riot" suspects were ever arrested, but local authorities quickly pointed out Freed's caustic remark which they maintained "incited" his followers to do mayhem.

On May 8, a grand jury handed down an indictment against Freed, charging him with "inciting the unlawful destruction of property during a riot touched off at a performance at his rock-and-roll show." The indictment stemmed from a long-forgotten anti-anarchy statute, last used in 1928.

The following week Alan was indicted on a second count, this time for "unlawfully, wickedly, and maliciously inciting a riot during a rock-and-roll show."

On May 16, the deejay pleaded innocent to the two charges and Judge Lewis Goldberg set bail at \$3000. "We had to hire a lawyer," explains Hooke, "...because Alan stood a chance of going to jail for twenty years."

The dubious charges were never dropped. Instead, in November 1958, Justice Goldberg allowed Freed to change his "not guilty" plea to one of "no contest," indefinitely shelving the charges. "It cost Alan a fortune in legal fees," remembers Hooke.

The Boston incident marked the first visible crack in Alan Freed's rock-and-roll kingdom. To the deejay's gleeful detractors, here was proof at last that Alan was unquestionably linked to juvenile delinquency and teenage violence. Ultimately it would lead to the loss of the deejay's prestigious "Rock 'N Roll Party," the radio program he'd singlehandedly built from scratch on WINS, beginning in 1954.—John Jackson