



The Brooklyn Paramount of 1959 as recreated in "American Hot Wax."

50s live again

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Story of rock's early days authentic

By ARCHER WINSTEN

"AMERICAN Hot Wax," at Loew's State II, the Orpheum and Murray Hill theaters, celebrates those last days of Alan Freed's reign as the majordomo of Rock N' Roll in 1959.

The emphasis is placed on the big beat of the great Chuck Berry, the wild Jerry Lee Lewis and totally insane Screaming Jay Hawkins who ends his act in a puff of smoke as he falls into his coffin.

The story has to do with the mounting pressures on disc jockey Freed, a lead pioneer in radio broadcasting of that kind of music during the '50s. Everyone wanted him to play their records, but he held resolutely to his own. He wouldn't listen to the station manager.

The district attorney was out to get him.

Police searched his office for evidence of drugs.

Income tax snoopers impounded the box-office receipts of his famous Brooklyn Paramount Big Beat Show.

A printed note on the screen says that was his last concert, that he moved to Los Angeles where he died penniless five years later.

The picture sacrifices story line clarity as to what precisely the issues were in favor of the music, and the kids trying to break in, and the enthusiasm of the audiences. It seems that what they were really talking about was payola, the scandal of the times, and a factor in Freed's downfall.

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But the picture as it stands has much to recommend it as a true sound-impression of the period. When you hear Freed playing Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti" you're really taken back. And when you see Chuck Berry playing and doing his stage act, and Jerry Lee Lewis standing up and beating on his piano, the years and the decades vanish.

The picture has a couple of other minor but pleasant virtues. A group of black singers, strictly of the street, make it to the big time and sound as if they could have done it.

Also, the comedy by-play of Fran Drescher as Sheryl, Freed's secretary, as she fends off Mookie (Jay Leno) his chauffeur, has an authentic look and sound. She got her start in "Saturday Night Fever" in a small bit, takes a big jump here, and is ready for considerable expansion in her next go-round.

In short, this is a picture that works in its own special way and for the audiences that still rock around the clock with that beat whenever they hear it. There must have been a sadder story that could have been told about Alan Freed, but this one will have to do until the other comes along.