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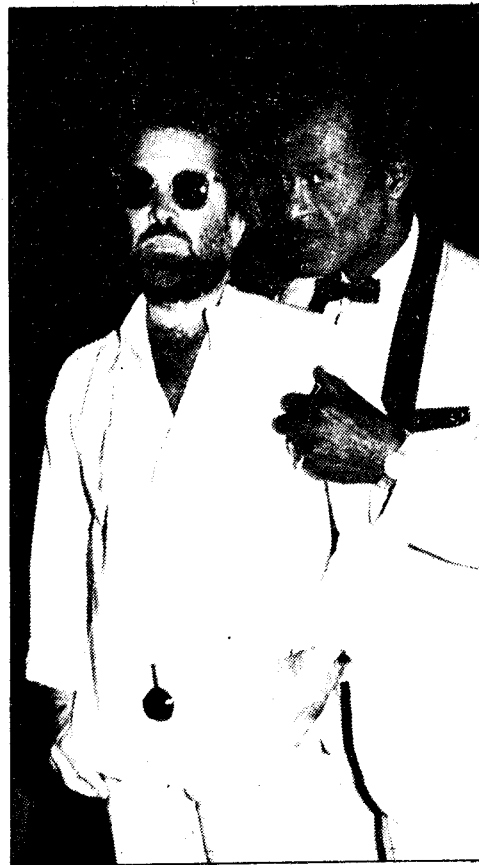
# America Waxes Hot



'58 vibes: rock 'n' roll deejay Freed and Lionel Hampton

CULVER PICTURES

*"Freed played all the black music! Played it first! Nobody else played it. Played 'Tweedlee Dee,' played Laverne Baker—played it, played it, played it!"*



BOB SEIDEMANN

'78 replay: "Hot Wax" director Mutrux and Chuck Berry

## By Tom Nolan

Unbelievable scene at high noon in the Wiltern Theatre at Wilshire and Western in Hollywood! Two thousand teenagers make pandemonium as Chuck Berry, '50s shade, duckwalks his guitar across the stage in front of a 12 piece band in plaid tuxedos! Johnny B. Goode, whose music NASA put on that collage LP they sent into outer space! An audience not even alive when the King of rock 'n' roll was at his peak cheers him now as if he were Peter Frampton playing a Stevie Wonder tune. And take a look at these kids: saddle shoes, white bucks, angora sweaters, pink scarves, bowling jackets, greasy hair, pony tails—and integration. Total '50s re-run—time warp city, as the makers of *American Hot Wax* have turned this musty deco palace into the Brooklyn Paramount, 1958.

And here's your host—Alan Freed! An actor, of course, Tim McIntire, but he's great—the epitome of a Caucasian r&b deejay, real stiff, duckwalking with the King. *White Man Gets Down*, doing a stilted

boogy, fingerpopping across the stage, moving his rubbery neck inside his collar like a George Pal gumbly . . .

*Cut and print.* House lights go up, and little moths flutter out of the frayed velvet seats. Two thousand kids give Berry an ovation, then file out to lunch.

The kids mill behind the theatre, centering around the sound truck where Berry's and other performers' numbers are being played back. Spontaneously they begin dancing in the street. "Don't they get enough of this stuff inside?" someone mutters. The whole thing is one giant high, and strangely enough, the kids all know the '50s steps. They're not cleancut *Happy Days* clones, either; there's a certain Nathanael West reality to these young folk. "Lookit that guy," whispers screenwriter John Kaye, nodding toward a four-foot-tall fellow with greased hair, black leather jacket, gumball jaws, and a ready wink. "I mean, what's that all *about!* These people—I don't know *where* they

come from. Definitely close encounters of the fourth kind . . .

Kaye himself looks like a time warp person, but from 10 years later: a balding blond longhair with a Brautigan moustache, wearing a poncho, canvas bag slung over his shoulder. He's been around, the usual screenwriter wars. His script for this film, based on a fictional week in the life of pioneer rock 'n' roll disc jockey Alan Freed—the man who coined the term “rock 'n' roll”—is more like a blueprint than a sacred text. “It's not a documentary, but the spirit, the authenticity are there. It's a period piece. We're trying to capture the naive excitement of a certain time, when rock 'n' roll was being born.” Payola is not dwelled upon in this film, he says. Neither are downbeat things like Freed's rotten health. Nor the bad blood that supposedly existed between the two stars playing themselves in this movie, Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis, the King and the Killer. “Floyd [MutruX, the director] is not into making any one thing too big. He's really into fun, having the movie be the star.”

Whatever the movie may be like, this scene today is certainly extraordinary. Living legends strolling by, their old trips resurfacing. Larry “Bony Moroni” Williams, wearing his '70s clothes: red turtleneck, some kind of Mayan mandala medallion with a gold bull's head . . . Screamin' Jay Hawkins in a creamcolored suit, “the black Vincent Price” . . . Jerry Lee Lewis, screened by his entourage, sequestered in a trailer . . . Berry, looming around, an ominous presence in the sunlight . . . Tim McIntire, also in his trailer, door shut, with a bunch of guys like Buddy Colette, who played sax in Freed's stage shows. They're crowded in there to share anecdotes and smoky guffaws, like Freed and the boys backstage swigging a quick one . . .

And here's director MutruX as he hits the street: white linen peasant shirt, flowing hair and beard. He's gulping vodka and lime from a plastic glass someone handed him the instant sunlight slapped his face. He talks in short enthusiastic bursts as he walks briskly past the clumps of extras.

“This picture . . . We're both lookin' at it, but . . . It looks hot. I think people are gonna go see it. It's a terrific story. Is it sad? Naw, it's . . . the story of a rebel who was against the establishment. The establishment wins the battle but they lose the war. They thought rock 'n' roll was dead and buried—be gone by the end of the summer! But we're over the hump now. This is rock 'n' roll history we're dealin' with here today. Yeah, it is exciting. People are gonna see this, they're

gonna see Jerry Lee and go—*chock!*—“Oh, Elton John wasn't the first guy to stand on a piano!” You know? Before Keith Richard, or Robert Plant or whoever any of those guys who play the guitar—there was this guy from St. Louis, Missouri, who wrote 10 songs in two years that are classics, you dig? I mean, before Alice Cooper, before Kiss, you gonna see a guy named Screamin' Jay Hawkins who had cobras and snakes, you know what I mean? Not that that means anything, but . . . I'm not even into that, but . . . there's a whole world of people out there that aren't hip to that. We're not makin' a movie to hip 'em, but . . .

“Why *am* I makin' this movie?” He stops. “I guess rock 'n' roll gave me a lot, man. No way to say it without soundin' corny. It just, whew, gave me a lot. I didn't know Freed. I was a West Coast guy, listened to Hunter Hancock, best friend was Ricky Nelson. I'm a Valley boy, Valley boy, Ventura Boulevard, but . . . I dunno. To be honest, I thought I could do it right, and so, I woulda hated somebody else to do it wrong. I grew up bein' moved by music. I don't know if that's an emotional reason. There were a lotta other projects I coulda done. I just wanted to do this right.

“I got rock 'n' roll consciousness. So does almost everybody on the fuckin' crew. Lotta people here were affected by Freed.” Floyd lowers his voice now to a weird hyper whisper as he paces back and forth across a stretch of sidewalk. “Freed played all the black music! Played it first! Nobody else played it. He played it! Played ‘Tweedlee Dee,’ played Laverne Baker—played it, played it, played it! Didn't know half the time whether it was black or white! Just played what he liked! He was a good guy to make a movie about, he was a good guy to make a movie about rock 'n' roll about. In retrospect, I think, if you're gonna tell the story about the beginning of rock 'n' roll—Jerry Lee said to me at the house on Saturday night, he said, ‘Make no mistake about it—he was the king of rock 'n' roll.’ Little Richard said to me, ‘I owe everything to him.’ Chuck Berry said, ‘He played my music first.’ He did! So I mean—that's—that's—

“Hey, King!” Floyd calls to Chuck Berry, and the master of rock 'n' roll stops in his tracks, wheels and approaches.

“What is it like, huh Chuck, to go back 20 years?” MutruX asks, all helpful smiles and showbiz.

Berry fixes me in his gaze. “It's just like it was yesterday,” he replies, as cold and alone and scarred as the moon his music now orbits. ■