

# **HAIL! HAIL! ROCK'N'ROLL**

By ALAN THOMPSON

*Alan Thompson has been presenting and producing Rock'n'Roll shows and documentaries for more than two decades. He owns and operates the Golden Days Archive and Production facility some of which can also be found in broadcasting stations and broadcast museums in the United States and yet, as he tells us in this feature, the idea for the original "Hail! Hail! Rock'n'Roll" shows were only scheduled for six weeks on a local radio station. Today, 21 years later, the programming can still be heard and it is highly likely that wherever you are listening in the UK the chances are something has come from the archive, Alan takes up the story in his own words....*

AS Danny and the Juniors once sang "Rock'n'Roll is here to stay. But I doubt even they realised what a poignant statement they were making nearly 50 years ago.

I know how they probably feel. A Rock'n'Roll radio programme that was scheduled on the radio for six weeks has since ricocheted and the buds of its family tree are still heard to this day. It was during the summer of 1985 that amongst others things, I had been presenting the perennial "Golden Days" programme on Reading's ILR station Radio 210. It went out late on Friday nights and at that time there was not all night television, BBC local radio closed down early and relayed Radio 2 which did not serve a "baby boomer" audience at that time of night as it does today and Radio Luxembourg had a poor signal. So we had the airwaves more or less to ourselves.

It was at this time that I figured that it was about time for a genuine Rock'n'Roll show – to be called "Hail! Hail! Rock'n'Roll" - and approached the Programme Controller, Terry Mann about the possibility of running a six-part series, two hours in duration with a documentary for the first hour and back-to-back music which would not normally be played during daytime output in the second.

Fortunately for me he agreed and I set about getting the material together and by the end of summer had collated everything for the research, sound bites and music for the six parts which would kick off in September. They comprised Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, a composite which included Eddie Cochran, Brenda Lee and Gene Vincent, a US radio documentary, The English Dream on British Rock'n'Roll and a Phil Spector Tribute. The second hour ripped through the airwaves with hurricane force and in all of the six weeks not one song was repeated.

The back-to-back music format, which later became the norm for the series, was borrowed from Roger Scott's excellent "Cruisin'" series which had run since 1974 on London's Capital Radio. But at the time HHRR was formulated there was no R'n'R show on Capital and I was always keen to let listeners know that Roger's programme was what I considered to be the granddaddy of them all. For listeners outside London that may be open to criticism. But I don't think anyone with any objectivity can dispute the enormous impact Roger had made to the music genre, especially, as like myself, he had had some experience on US radio.

The HHRR series attracted a considerable amount of letters of interest and reaction from the listeners. One as I recall was "Pat the Rocking Maniac in Basingstoke" – still out there Pat?! Terry asked me if it would be possible to put a weekly programme together as part of the regular "Golden Days" programme. He obviously saw my look of surprise and quickly added: "Oh, just the music, not a documentary every week!" I replied, "Just as well!" It had taken considerable planning, but as requested HHRR started off every Friday evening's programme.

As 1985 drew to a close, more artists became available and in early November, I ventured to the Midlands to witness the Regal Rock'n'Blues Reunion Tour and boy am I glad I did. There would never be another show like it. On the bill was Frankie Ford, the New Orleans Dynamo Man, a revamped Marvellettes with Brenda Watty, Grandfather of R-and-B Bo Diddley, Bobby Vee, Del Shannon and topping the bill for the entire second half was Rick Nelson.

A UK tour had been the brain-child of New York impresario Richard Nader, who still runs a top agency with wife Deborah.

I managed to interview them all. But the promotional tapes recorded by Jim Pewter at station KRLA in Los Angeles that had been sent out in advance, also contained some very good interview material. Little did I realise at the time just how important it was going to be. The same promotional tapes were being aired on offshore station Laser 558. Due to the Marine Etc Broadcasting Offences Bill (MEBO) of 1967, I was unable to supply the station with the interviews. They were, however, syndicated from 210 to other stations in the southeast and to GWR in the west. I had not edited all of the interviews into hour-long programmes mixed with music at that time.

Then came the hammer-blow. Whilst driving back in the early hours of the morning following a live New Year's show I had presented in Dorset, my girlfriend and I heard the devastating news that Rick Nelson had been killed in an air-crash. As fans will probably know there is more to that story but I don't want to harp on about that here.

I got up in the morning feeling somewhat stunned because I had to yet to produce Rick's contribution to the series. The radio station called me and I did a live piece into the Stewart Macintosh show. Next, I had to decide quickly what was to be done for a tribute programme as I had only three days to put the whole thing together. I immediately called KRLA's Programme Director David Schwartz <corr> in Los Angeles to see if we could agree on using each other's material. He readily said yes and the programme with Rick's interview inclusion was made within the three days and actually aired on the Friday night. I had never put something together so quickly, and I haven't had to since. A copy of the programme was sent to KRLA-AM and it was subsequently broadcast on that station in Los Angeles and GWR-FM on Alan Burston's brilliant dinosaur R'n'R Show, as well as extracts on BBC Radio Oxford and Radio Luxembourg. It was the only time I ever appeared on the international broadcaster, although I had had dealings with the station.

Throughout the remainder of the 1980s more artists were added to the series and a complete rerun was heard during 1986.

But one of the prize goblets handed to me was to compere the Ben E King Show at the Hexagon Theatre, Reading and the subsequent programme that resulted has been heard on around a dozen stations. Ben was a really lovely guy, so unassuming and completely surprised that his 1961 hit "Stand by me" had hit the chart here due to a jeans commercial!

In January 1987, Radio 210 was extended in transmission area to Basingstoke and Andover and with the powerful transmitter from Hannington it could also be picked up in adjacent areas as well and gave the station a massive audience day and night. So another repeat of the original programmes was called for and again the reaction was fantastic.

It would be easy to make assumptions as to the programmes success but the audience research figures spoke for themselves with thousands tuning in. At Radio 210 a couple of ideas were developed namely to have regular guests who knew the music. Funnily enough those who did know their music were not even born when the music was around the first time. There were the five Jive Guys and a University student Joe the Hepcat sporting quiff and Edwardian style jacket. Although the Jive Guys did not keep the programmes up after a few months, I have to say they were very good at what they did. One person from the original team who did continue to contribute to the series was Adrian Clements and he was the driving force behind a programme on Alan Freed, the American DJ who first coined the phrase "Rock'n'Roll." He also reworked the programme for an airing on BBC radio with me a couple of years later. Did Freed actually take bribes? Listen to the programme to find out!!

I left 210 when I joined the BBC in January 1988 and it would be over a year later that the idea would be revived.

But revive it I did when appointed as Programme Organiser at BBC Wiltshire Sound, which could be heard in six counties. First of all, I managed to secure my old buddy from GWR, Alan Burston for a two hour show on Sunday nights then a few months later we voted on a regional programme when our broadcasting hours were extended on Saturday nights. We booked Stuart Colman in the "Rocker Returns" which radiated on the nine stations of the south and west region and through the two channel islands stations it was heard in parts of France as well.

As a departmental manager of the station, I only usually presented one programme a week on Saturday mornings 10 till 1 and the middle hour very often had a "Golden Days" or "Hail! Hail! Rock'n'Roll" strand to it. But every so often if I had to extend the programme until 2-00 pm when the regular programme at that time was off, I would then play out a HHRR sequence in the same format as had been the case at Radio 210.

All of the aforementioned documentaries, which had been produced independently, were aired on the BBC Wiltshire station. Even after I had left to work at Radio 2 as a producer in Bristol, the programmes by Stuart Colman and Alan Burston did continue for a time.

But I have to say, frankly, the station suffered a spate of bad management following my departure until a former colleague, the Programme Organiser from Radio Devon took up the hot seat and then the station started to stabilise. But the Rock'n'Roll shows had gone as Ron Neil the boss of BBC Local radio wanted to give people issues to talk about, even in weekend programmes when people were supposed to be relaxing or enjoying themselves.

This was around 1992. In the meantime I had moved back to commercial radio and for a year ran Severn Sound in Gloucester and reintroduced similar strands there but by far and away the most important development came when I went free-lance in early 1993 and versions of the Rock'n'Roll shows radiated on Southend-based Breeze AM. During 1991 I had met Keith Rogers who was Programme Controller at the station and he ran some of the original series on his station. I was also holding down a number of programming strands during the summer of 93 together with some more at Shropshire-based Sunshine 855.

Later that year after a commercial radio licence application I was working on failed to materialise, I joined the Christian-owned elevenSEVENTY am <corr> based in High Wycombe. Although the initial board were all Christians, the station's sound on air was not overtly religious. This was largely due to the expertise of programmer Andrew Philips, an Australian who had come over to launch the station. I was initially appointed as News Editor but within a few months had joined the board, Andrew launched a "Golden Days" strand on Sunday afternoons with myself at the helm and I became Programme Controller upon Andrew leaving for the GWR Group later in 1994.

The first GD show was actually a repeat of the Buddy Holly documentary in February 1994 to commemorate the 35th anniversary of Buddy's untimely demise. Other Rock'n'Roll related programmes also radiated at this time, with a further repeat later in the week. In late 94 I introduced the "Golden Hour" sequence in the 10 – 1 pm weekday programme I was then presenting which included some Rock'n'Roll. Such was the success of this format that on one occasion we actually put out "The Heart and Soul of Rock'n'Roll" one Friday morning using the tried and tested format used on 210 and BBC Wiltshire Sound before.

We could have repeated this idea but I was concerned that advertisers aiming at a slightly younger daytime audience may not have appreciated it at that time of day. However, in 1996 the HHRR strand was again introduced on Saturday evenings this time as a two hour programme. I initially set this up but very quickly handed over to Robbie Owen, who is now the programme boss of Hertbeat FM Hertfordshire.

The regular Sunday afternoon outing for "Golden Days" did still have high input of Rock'n'Roll. It was during the summer of 1994, that I received a letter from Jackie Clark, who at the time was a fan and involved with the Billy Fury Fan Club in the south. We met some weeks later as I was in Los Angeles on other broadcasting business with Dick Clark Productions.

This is where things started to mushroom. Jackie was a friend of DJ David Symonds at Capital Gold and another singer-songwriter-cum-disc jockey, Frankie Connor from “op-north.” It appears that both Frankie and myself were presenting similar programmes. He was at that time working part time for Liverpool’s Radio City Gold. Frankie had played with a group named the Hideaways at the Cavern Club and knew all of the groups that had played there during the halcyon days of the Beatles. He is also related to Mike Pender of the Searchers. Many of the groups at that time including the Beatles had covered American Rock’n’Roll songs. We exchanged contacts and the series in the south certainly flourished as a result of the connection.

In 1995 “Golden Days” was syndicated. I could go on endlessly about which stations took what at a given time but to simplify it, the cream of the GD and HHRR series were syndicated and over the next two years these stations took the output: elevenSEVENTY am, <corr>, Breeze AM (Essex), Sunshine 855 (Shropshire), Radio Maldwyn (Mid Wales), YCR (Yorkshire), 603 Radio, Cheltenham and the GWR Classic Gold Network, although the latter was for GD.

It is also worth mentioning that in 1996, while I was working on a number of projects as an independent producer, I was asked by Radio 2 with regards to some research matter that had previously gone in to the “English Dream” programme made for 210 some 11 years earlier. The programme, a one-off entitled “Rock a round the box” -- was an updated version of the original programme I had put out before. But with additional BBC resources, the production skills of Mark Hill and Marty Wilde’s descriptive narrative it was a more polished effort. . It was about the R’n’R shows on television in the late 50s and early 60s, for which Jack Good was largely responsible and was transmitted in July 1996.

In the programme Adam Faith mused: “I doubt that anyone at the BBC could have possibly related to him (Good) at that time. He was a big Billy Bunter lovable sort of guy, but I can imagine he was the subject of many interesting discussions over a pipe full of tobacco!”

Also on this programme were Cliff Richard, Tim Rice, Bill Wyman and others from the era together with archive, part of which came from GD. Again this programme sewed the seeds for yet another BBC programme some seven years later. At the latter end of 1996, Confederate Broadcasting, another indie outfit, were producing a series on “Teenagers in love” and GD supplied some recordings of the Alan Freed radio and TV shows made by America’s ABC network in the 1950s. The three part series was subsequently aired on Radio 2 in January 1997.

It was in 1996 that I had gone to New York to meet with Andy Denmark <corr> Vice President of Programming for United Stations Radio Networks (USRN) to discuss licensing of music material in the US. It appears in the land of plenty that there is a thirst for British made product. USRN was part owned by Los Angeles-based Dick Clark Productions and I had known Head of Radio Pam Miller-Algar at that time for about six years.

I once asked her as to how we Brits could have our versions of Rock'n'Roll programmes accepted by the US. Her reply did take me by surprise: "If a Brit makes a programme of American music, we know it has done from a position of respect." As a result of one top level meeting at DCP in Los Angeles, the idea for a Greats of Rock'n'Roll series was discussed – watch this space.

In fact at the end of 1990, while I was the BBC, Dick Clark was recorded for my regular Saturday morning show and he expressed an interest in the interviews I had undertaken with British pop groups of the 1960s and indeed some were supplied for Dick's perennial "Rock, Roll and Remember." At that time it was airing on some 200 stations throughout the United States from host station KOST-FM.

While working as an independent producer, Jackie Clark introduced me to David Symonds and the idea of a syndicated "Golden Days" strand was discussed and sponsorship was also discussed at the same time with See For Miles records in Ashford, Middlesex. What followed were negotiations and yet more negotiations to secure the series for what was probably going to be a network deal. Although some stations were prepared to take up the series of Rock'n'Roll shows and other allied oldies programmes, it would need a network deal to secure the series and to make the necessary profits to keep the programme going. However, without the major breakthrough the idea was shelved. I think it is very sad that this did not materialise. With David's excellent presentation skills, he had had extensive experience on BBC network radio and ILR, and myself writing and producing the series, it would have been a sure fire winner. But regrettably along with the Classic Album show with ex-Laser presenter David Lee Stone, the idea never made it to the airwaves.

At around this time I had also attempted to place HHRR in the Radio 2 Commissioning Round of 1996 but it lost out to other programmes for the regular Thursday evening strand.

But all was not lost. By the late 1990s "Hail! Hail! Rock'n'Roll" was about to have a renaissance airing first on Cambridge Café Radio later renamed Cambridge Red and then again on X-CEL FM. On this station four of the original series were broadcast – Presley, Holly, Nelson etc and three new music-based programmes were made for the audience in the Cambridgeshire/Suffolk./Norfolk/Lincolnshire region and it also included two US airbases in the area.

Since 1998, the programmes that were broadcast were on the superior FM frequencies and this obviously went some way to boosting the programme's popularity and it was gaining a younger audience hungry to know why this phenomenon had changed music forever, as well as the older audience who confessed to remembering it the first time around.

In 2001 X-CEL FM was sold and in October of that year I rejoined the BBC after a gap of 10 years apart from the two programmes I had worked on for Radio 2. It was after some six months on the news desk of BBC Eastern Counties based in Norwich that I produced "Telstar at 40" about Britpop producer Joe Meek with Keith Skues.

He has a lengthy broadcasting cv that certainly dwarfs mine. Keith, I had listened to when he was a DJ on the offshore stations Radios Caroline South and London in the 1960s and was one of Radio 1's earliest DJs.

Keith and I got on well together and the archives we both had seemed an ideal candidate for more Rock'n'Roll music series. In 2003 we first worked on the two-parter "Crazy Man Crazy" which told the story of how R'n'R came into being and had interviews with many artists of the day and we searched long and hard to get the music and interviews we wanted – Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, Murray the K, Felice Bryant, Bo Diddley and many others. This was followed by "Rock around the block" and was yet another update on the programme made for Radio 2 in 1996. On this programme were Cliff Richard, Marty Wilde, Billy Fury, Adam Faith, the Vernons Girls, rock archivist John Tobler and part of a performance by visiting artist Eddie Cochran. But perhaps the most surprising revelation in the series came from Marcel Stellman a producer and arranger with Decca for 30 years when he said: "I know Elvis Presley was a monster and there are songs by him that I liked – but I preferred Jerry Lee Lewis." Marcel, incidentally, now holds the rights on Channel 4 TV's "Countdown" programme.

These R'n'R shows all radiated on BBC Eastern Counties stations and have since been repeated and heard on other stations including BBC Radio Jersey, BBC Radio Lincolnshire and BBC Radio Berkshire. In 2005 the Presley documentary was pulled off the shelf again and aired on BBC Radio Berkshire. But perhaps the most important aspect to the series is the fact that they are now archived at the Rock'n'Roll Hall of Fame, Cleveland, Ohio; the Museum of Television and Radio, New York; with Pam Miller Algar, Los Angeles; and under review is the Museum of Broadcast Communications, Chicago which has a new facility opening in September this year.

Yes, it does appear that Americans like us Brits writing and producing their music, as it is done from a position of respect, as Pam told me way back in 1994. Keith and I have continued to produce music documentaries, two of which were Jazz and have aired regionally.

I have recently invested in the Sun catalogue and now the "Golden Days" archive contains some 1,500 hours of programming which contains a good proportion of R'n'R artists. This facility so far has been better used in the United States than in this country. And thereby hangs a tale – there is no longer a programme on the radio in this country called "Hail! Hail! Rock'n'Roll", there are R'n'R programmes on Radio 2 and on some local stations. My own feeling is that anyone who keeps the genre of music going should be applauded but I also have to say there's not anything quite like "Hail! Hail! Rock'n'Roll"- but then again I would say that wouldn't I?!

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