



Spector painted as both villain, victim in trial's opening statements

By Michael Muskal, Times Staff Writer
4:36 PM PDT, April 25, 2007

Jurors were told today that they will have to decide whether music legend Phil Spector displayed a pattern of violence against women that led to the murder of an actress in his home or that he was deliberately targeted by police investigating a tragic accident.

Prosecution and defense lawyers painted the sharply different scenarios during opening statements in Spector's long-awaited murder trial -- more than four years after Lana Clarkson died in the celebrity music producer's Alhambra mansion on Feb. 3, 2003.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you will be introduced to evidence of the defendant's very rich history of violence, a history of violence against women, a history of violence involving guns," Los Angeles Deputy Dist. Atty. Alan Jackson told the jury during his opening statement.

"Through the presentation of the evidence in this case, you will be introduced to the real Phillip Spector," Jackson said.

He recited a litany of Spector's alleged incidents against various women and some of them are expected to testify.

"It's the same pattern," Jackson said. "Spector had been drinking. Spector had a romantic interest in the women, and they were in a room alone. When she tried to leave, Spector flew into a rage."

Defense attorney Bruce Cutler dismissed the prosecution's contention that Spector suffered from any deadly pattern.

"Fame and success come back to haunt you," he said of Spector's past encounters. "The evidence will show this was a tragic accident.

"The evidence will also show that before they even had a cause of death, they [the police] had murder on their minds," Cutler said, dismissing the police investigation.

"The evidence indicates this was a self-inflicted wound," he said of Clarkson.

"I'm not saying the evidence will show this was a suicide," Cutler said. "The evidence will show this is an accidental suicide."

The defense will resume its opening Thursday after Cutler spoke about 45 minutes today. The presentation was often rambling, dipping into Spector's musical history as the lawyer tried to argue the case. Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Larry Paul Fidler sustained prosecution objections to the argumentative nature at least 10 times.

If Cutler appeared to be treading water at times, it could have been from an earlier legal dispute that briefly delayed the defense's opening. The argument centered on three statements made by Spector to police during the morning hours after Clarkson's body was found.

Fidler ruled that the three statements could not be admitted to the trial by the defense under

California law and therefore the defense could not use them in the opening statements.

The ruling "denuded us of much of what I wanted to go into," Cutler said. He also protested that the dispute came up at the last second when he learned that the prosecution wouldn't introduce the statements.

"I don't want to be hamstrung," Cutler said.

Because of the argument, the prosecution was able to dominate the day's proceedings and portrayed Spector as a person who had a pattern of committing violence of women over decades. The last, tragic example was the death of Clarkson, Jackson argued in his opening.

Wearing an open purple shirt and a light-colored suit, Spector listened from the defendant's table, occasionally shaking his head no as painted a gruesome portrait of a man who couldn't control his anger, especially after drinking.

It was that pattern that played out in the early hours of Feb. 3, 2003 and involved Clarkson. Spector "put a loaded pistol inside Lana Clarkson's mouth -- inside her mouth -- and shot her to death," Jackson said.

Spector, 67, is charged with second-degree murder in the death and faces 15 years to life in prison if convicted.

In addition to portraying Clarkson's death as a continuation of Spector's violent life, Jackson said the evidence of that night would show that Spector killed Clarkson, whom he had met hours earlier for the first time.

Jackson told the jury of nine men and three women they would hear from the limousine driver who waited at Spector's home, heard gunshots from inside, then saw Spector come out the door.

Spector carried a gun, his hand dripped with blood and he confessed to shooting someone, Jackson said the driver would testify.

"That evidence, ladies and gentlemen, is going to paint a very, very clear picture, a picture of a man, Phillip Spector, who when he is confronted with the right circumstances, when he is confronted with the right situation, turns sinister and deadly," Jackson said.

Cutler dismissed the driver's account, saying the chauffeur had been sleeping in the car and couldn't hear any gunshots. Cutler also dismissed the weapon as an "ornamental gun" rather than a .38-caliber Colt Cobra Special, as described by the prosecution.

Spector, a record producer whose ear and vision propelled him into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, is accused of killing Clarkson, whom he met earlier while she was working in the Foundation Room, the VIP area of the House of Blues.

Spector had been drinking rum drinks through a night of visiting favored haunts, including Trader Vic's in Beverly Hills and Dan Tana's in West Hollywood before ending up at the House of Blues.

There, Spector met Clarkson, 40, an actress who starred in several films directed by Roger Corman, including "Barbarian Queen." She had a role in such films as "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" and had appeared in numerous TV shows, including "Knight Rider," "Happy Days" and "Three's Company."

With his hands sometimes shaking, Spector today sat between his lawyers as the proceedings began just after after 10 a.m. The courtroom was packed with journalists, spectators and the family of Lana Clarkson.

As local celebrity trials go, Spector's follows in a tradition that includes O.J. Simpson, Michael Jackson and Robert Blake.

Though famous in rock circles for his work with such groups as the Crystals, the Ronettes and even John Lennon, Spector is less famous than Simpson and Blake, who were acquitted of murder charges. Jackson, the biggest music star in the group, was acquitted of child molestation charges in Santa Barbara.

Though Spector was famous more than a generation ago, his status is one of the issues that the lawyers will play with during the trial that is expected to last up to three months.

When asked in a juror questionnaire whether high-profile people in Los Angeles are treated the same way by police as others, five jurors said they agreed, six disagreed and one had no opinion.

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Staff writers Peter Y. Hong and John Spano contributed to this report.