Spector trial features two equally pugnacious lawyers

by UPI

LOS ANGELES - One looks like a grown-up choirboy. The other resembles a retired boxer.

But the two lawyers at center stage Wednesday for opening statements in the long-delayed Phil Spector murder trial are considered equally pugnacious.

Jury selection in the acclaimed rock 'n' roll producer's murder trial wrapped up Tuesday as lawyers agreed on six alternate panelists. A jury of nine men and three women was sworn in last week.

The jurors, and anyone watching the televised trial, will hear Wednesday from Deputy District Attorney Alan Jackson, a boyish 12-year veteran of the office with an alternately folksy and steely court presence.

Following Jackson will be Spector's fiery lead lawyer Bruce Cutler, a 58-year-old barrel-chested New York litigator whose speaking style can be described as gruff-eloquent. His highest profile acquittals came while representing the so-called "Teflon Don" John Gotti in the 1980s and 1990s.

Both Jackson and Cutler Wednesday will preview what their cases will show about the Feb. 3, 2003 shooting death of actress Lana Clarkson, 40. Prosecutors are expected to contend that a drunken Spector, 67, killed the statuesque beauty at his castlelike mansion and the shooting fits a pattern of past instances in which the pop music pioneer threatened women with guns.

Cutler will say that evidence shows Clarkson shot herself, that she was despondent over her stalled acting career and that she spoke of suicide.

While some observers have knocked Cutler's media savvy and, at times, over-the-top style, Cutler's courtroom comportment can be remarkably proper. With a heavy Brooklyn accent, $10 words often spring from Cutler's mouth.

"He has an interesting lexicon that exudes formality," said New York lawyer Gerald Shargel, who defended Gotti with Cutler. "But beneath that formality is a Joe Frazier type of style. Make not mistake about it, he's a street-fighting man. He puts his head down and keeps on coming."

Spector's team also includes Los Angeles criminal defense veteran Roger Rosen; New York-area lawyer Linda Kenney Baden, who will present part of the defense's opening statement and; Christopher Plourd, a veteran San Diego criminal lawyer and scientific evidence specialist.

Prosecutor Jackson's reputation is not as celebrated as Cutler's but he has already made a mark in Los Angeles criminal courts.

Along with Spector co-counsel Patrick Dixon, Jackson led the successful double-murder prosecution of Michael Goodwin in the slayings of racing legend Mickey Thompson and his wife Trudy. The verdict in January was one of the highest-profile wins for Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office in years.

Jackson's style with jurors has grated on some opponents, particularly Goodwin's lawyer, Deputy Public Defender Elena Saris.

"Sometimes in court he reminded me of someone who was auditioning for a high school musical," Saris said.

But Los Angeles-based defense lawyer Michael Nasatir said Jackson is impressive.

"He's very very tough in a very quiet way," he said.

The jury that will sit in judgment of Spector is an eclectic bunch. It includes a producer for the news magazine show "Dateline NBC," who acknowledged that he had been covering the Spector case and was familiar with the players. Government workers, a mechanic, and a film production group marketer are also on the panel.

On Tuesday, prosecutors complained that Spector's defense was systematically rejecting women from the jury box. Superior Court Judge Larry Paul Fidler warned defense lawyers about the pattern but still allowed them to remove a woman from the alternate panel. A short time later, six back-up jurors - four men and two women - were approved.

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