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REVIEW: 'Million Dollar Quartet' a ringside seat to a legendary summit

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Photo L to R: Sean McGibbon, Chance Wall, Kavan Hashemian, and Peter Oyloe;
by Elizabeth Aaron

As a lifelong Elvis Presley fan girl, I was excited to hear that “Million Dollar Quartet” was going to kick off this season of shows at the Clarence Brown Theatre on the University of Tennessee campus. It’s the Clarence Brown’s 49th season, and it certainly started things off with a bang. Or maybe that should be with a “shake, rattle and roll.”

Hey, all my jokes can’t be winners.

The show is based on an amazing night in 1956 when four legendary performers descended on Sun Records, the studio where they all got their start. One of them was Elvis, of course, but he was joined by Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis. Musical history was made that night, and “Million Dollar Quartet” gives the audience a peak inside.

But, it’s not just the story of the music made at that fateful summit. It’s also the story of Sun Records founder Sam Phillips, who discovered each of these men and gave them their break. Elvis’ start at Sun Records is well known, of course, due to the release of “That’s All Right, Mama” — the song that skyrocketed him to fame.

Sun is where Perkins originally recorded “Blue Suede Shoes,” a song that would become much more popular for his peer, Elvis. For Cash, you might be familiar with one of his Sun tunes, “I Walk the Line.” Lewis can’t be left out, though. He recorded both “Great Balls of Fire” and “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Going On” while at Sun.

But then, you’re not reading this review for a history lesson, are you?

Phillips (Levi Kreis) narrates the show, and he introduces the audience to his little studio and the performers they’ll meet that night. He also gives us a glimpse at how he met each of these men. Fun fact: Kreis originated the role of Jerry Lee Lewis in the Broadway version of the play and won the 2010 Tony for Best Featured Actor in a Musical.

I can see why. I’ve never been a fan of the real-life Lewis, but on stage, the “character” of Jerry Lee (Sean McGibbon) is magnetic, and it’s impossible to keep your eyes from drifting over to see what he’s doing. He’s a heck of a lot of fun to watch, and I can see why the role is a crowd-pleaser and award winner.

At the other end of the spectrum, you have Elvis (Kavan Hashemian). This marks Hashemian’s ninth production as the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll, and I was blown away by the attention to detail the actor put into playing Elvis. I knew it wasn’t real, but there was such a dedication and focus on getting it right that I would honestly go see a full-length concert of Hashemian as Elvis. That might sound silly, but this wasn’t just an impersonation. For an hour and a half, he became Elvis, from his mannerisms to his performance. I will say he did better with the higher-pitched songs, but I was still amazed.

Perkins (Chance Wall) was spot-on, too, and provided a lot of laughs for the show, as he and Lewis picked and argued. Speaking of picking, Perkins’ craftsmanship on a guitar was on full display. With a live band on stage, the music was as

much a star as the actual singing. That goes for Lewis and his famous piano skills, too.

Rounding out the group was Mr. Cash himself (played by Peter Oyloe). This was probably the “character” that felt the most like a stage performance for me. It’s not that Oyloe didn’t do a great job, but he didn’t quite have the same presence and vocal abilities to help you really get lost in his portrayal. The real Johnny Cash had that deep bass-baritone that could make you believe the Devil himself was talking to you. Oyloe’s tone was a bit higher, although he nailed “Riders in the Sky” during the show’s encore. Where was that voice earlier?

I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention Missy Wise’s performance as Dyanne, Elvis’ girlfriend who tagged along with him to the studio. She nabbed a couple of numbers of her own, including “Fever,” and provided some lovely harmonies.

“Million Dollar Quartet” is night of music, brotherhood and farewells. Elvis had left Sun Records the year before to go to RCA, and Perkins and Cash were both heading to Columbia. Lewis was the only performer that night who was planning a future at Sun.

The show just kicked off last weekend and will run through Sept. 22. It’s a night of great music, great performances and a whole lotta nostalgia. If you’re like the folks in my audience, you’ll find yourself clapping, singing and even dancing along as these performers invite you to be a part of what is arguably one of the greatest nights in rock ‘n’ roll history.

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