The Clarence Brown Theatre's season-opening production of “Million Dollar Quartet” is like a great concert. You don’t want it to be over and are dance happy when there’s an encore.

Despite the fact it’s stacked with 22 songs in about 108 minutes, this is a play not a concert. Wrapped between and around such songs as “Blue Suede Shoes,” “Great Balls of Fire” and “I Walk the Line” is a real story of friendship, gratitude, regrets and those early days of rock ‘n roll.

If you read no further, know this — “Million Dollar Quartet” plays through Sept. 22 at the University of Tennessee theater and you should see it (Tickets and show times at clarencebrowntheatre.com). If, of course, you enjoy a good story, now classic rock ‘n roll songs and the chance to dance in your seat.

The story plays out inside Memphis’ Sun Records studio on a December evening back in ’56. It’s based on a Dec. 4, 1956, impromptu jam session at producer Sam Phillips’ studio attended by Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins.

It began as a recording session for Perkins (actor Chance Wall), desperate for a hit after his “Blue Suede Shoes” Phillips (Levi Kreis) brings in Lewis (Sean McGibbon), a hot-shot, big-mouth, wide-eyed piano player who’s had one record and two wives.

Cash (Peter Oyloe), tormented with news he doesn’t want to share, drops by to talk to Phillips. Then Presley (Kavan Hashemian), a big star who misses Phillips’ direction brings his girlfriend Dyanne (Missy Wise) by the studio.

What began as Perkins’ recording session turns into the only time the four men played together and musical history.

THESE GUYS KNOW THEIR ROLES

The cast is filled with actors who know this story and its quality shows. All four principals have played their roles in other venues’ productions. In addition, Zach Lentinok in the supporting role of Jay Perkins has played the part in Chicago productions.

While this is Kreis’ first time as Phillips, he’s no stranger to “Million Dollar Quartet.” He originated the
Lewis role on Broadway, winning a 2010 Tony.

So let’s talk music. Every tune here is stellar; most got play-stopping applause from Friday’s opening night audience. Hashemian, who’s performed around the world as Elvis, has perfected Presley’s gyrations and mannerisms. McGibbon’s wide-eyed Lewis is often comic relief.

Wall’s Perkins is a formerly dirt-poor sharecropper with a hip flask, seething that Presley got the fame for covering his “Blue Suede Shoes.” And when Oyloe sings, it’s easy to think you’re hearing Cash himself.

THERE’S A STORY TOO

But this play directed by UT associate professor Kate Buckley with musical direction by guest artist Kory Danielson isn’t just a string of tunes. Its backbone is the sometimes misty-eyed inside story of Sun Records and of the relationships between five men who made its music.

It’s much a story about Phillips as the four musicians. He’s portrayed as a father figure who gave the men a chance when others won’t. Kreis, an Oliver Springs native and singer-songwriter-actor, is also the play’s narrator. He plays the role as the perfect balance of buddy-father-rock wizard, nurturing, pushing and scolding by turns.

So when first Cash and then Perkins deliver the play’s climactic blow — surprising Phillips that they’re moving to Columbia Records — Kreis’ heartache and pain rolls like a wave to the back of the theater.

My only disappointment — “Million Dollar Quartet” doesn’t take requests. I’d love to have heard Oyloe’s Cash sing “Ring of Fire.”