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Tuesday, Jun 15, 2004

Entertainment

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Posted on Tue, Feb. 11, 2003

## FST Cabaret's 'Guitar Girls' hits right chord

JACK EDDLEMAN  
Special to the Herald

"Guitar Girls," currently at the Florida Studio Theatre Cabaret stage, is quite simply one of the most dazzlingly exhilarating displays of vocal and instrumental virtuosity in memory.

Five superbly gifted performers guide us through the folk, rock, country and torch songs that make up this tribute to the female songwriters of the 20th century, and what a talented group they are: Joni Mitchell, Carole King, Janis Joplin, Dolly Parton, Mary Chapin Carpenter and June Carter Cash.

The creative staff have come up with a superb program of one showstopper after another. The opening sequence, with the three girls and one guy on guitars, displays dynamic rhythmic work, with excellent close harmony singing. The whole room becomes a big, happy hootenanny. I have rarely seen so many happy, smiling faces in an audience. The joy coming off the beautiful Cabaret stage is downright contagious, and it's a two-way bridge.

Pretty little brunette, Mimi Bessette leads off "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" in a lovely, plaintive soprano, simply arranged for guitar, at first, then the fiddle and auto-harp. That goes into a duet with attractive blonde, Rhonda Coulet, where both added roulades and ornamentation that could equal any of the fioritura in an operatic aria - remarkable technical facility!

Then Stewart Gregory gave us a smoothly sung "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine" in a light baritone, with some floating head voice passages. His next solo, "House of the Rising Sun," sounded like a basso-profundo - spectacular singing!

Emily Mikesell made a lovely thing of "500 Miles," beautifully sung in Jeffrey Dillon's dramatic lighting, which was subtle, evocative and strikingly sculptural all evening.

Director/choreographer Dennis Courtney's staging was resourceful, witty and vividly imaginative throughout. From the foot stamping ebullience of the big numbers to subtle, moving images, such as a shawl gently placed on Mikesell's shoulders during "500 Miles," or

to subliminal story lines worked into Bessette's country-twanged "Jolene," it was obvious the evening was being guided by a master of his craft.

Musical direction was in the brilliant hands of Michael Sebastian, who played keyboards, sang backup, and in a stunning surprise, played a gorgeous cello accompaniment to Joni Mitchell's splendid "Both Sides Now," which was not only marvelously sung by the company, but had a wonderful smoke effect, illustrating the "clouds" lyrics, another instance of the first-rate sense of detail that enriched this entire incredible entertainment.

Parton's "Nine to Five" from the film of the same name brought out a sassy spirit, and Coulet went wild on "I Feel Lucky." Mikesell had a fine time with "Big Boned Gal" backed by solo fiddle, and then joined by everyone. "Goodbye Earl" had sly, dry wit, plus some macabre humor and "Love is Like a Butterfly" was full of poetic imagery - "a rare and beautiful dream" - and some fancy fingering by Gregory on the guitar. The pairing of "I Will Always Love You" and "You've Got a Friend" elicited some passionate, committed singing that was moving in its simple, inner grace.

The masterful playing of so many instruments - banjo, mandolin, tambourine, fiddle, synthesizer, Auto Harp, cello and piano - while maintaining some very complicated harmonies and arrangements was totally awesome.

You will have to travel far and wide to find an entertainment compiled with such talent and taste as "Guitar Girls." Marcella Beckwith's costumes were attractive and appropriate, and her backdrop a model of ingenuity.

By the time you got to the finale medley of "If I Had a Hammer" and "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" the spirit, depth and stunning virtuosity of the Fabulous Five will keep this toe-tapping, foot-stamping celebration in your memory for many moons to come. Cheers to all!

## IF YOU GO

**What:** "Guitar Girls"

**Where:** FST Goldstein Cabaret, 1241 N. Palm Ave.

**When:** Through March 22; 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Sundays, 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. select Wednesdays and Fridays

**Box office:** 366-9000

**Tickets:** \$20-\$22; food and drink available

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*Jack Eddleman has appeared in eight Broadway musicals and directed nine productions for the New York City Opera Company at Lincoln Center.*

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