

Article for 4/15/04: Florida Studio Theatre's One-Hit Wonders:

Florida Studio Theatre has opened "One-Hit Wonders" in its charming cabaret and it's no wonder that the four wonderful performers are a hit. Julia Cardia, Jannie Jones, Gary Lindemann and Jim Weaver have talent up the wazoo and they've taken songs from the past 50 years that topped the hit parade and made them into classics. This is one show you have to see.

Granted, my background is strictly classical but even I've heard of "American Pie," "Harper Valley PTA," "Leader of the Pack" and "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue." But they never struck me as anything particularly great. And I certainly never realized that they all had something in common. Each of those songs, along with "Don't Worry, Be Happy," "Chariots of Fire," "Locomotion" and (my childhood favorite "Purple People Eater" were one hitters. For example, "Don't Worry, Be Happy," was the only hit for the amazingly talented Bobby McFerrin as a singer/songwriter. The same goes for Bill Conti who wrote and performed "Gonna Fly Now," (the theme from "Rocky"). Ditto for Don McLean, the songwriter and singer of "American Pie."

Remember "Walk Right In"? It was the only Top 10 hit for The Rooftop Singers. And Kris Kristofferson's poignant song, "Me and Bobby McGee" was Janis Joplin's only big hit.

But what makes FST's One-Hit Wonders really wonderful is the way director-choreographer Dennis Courtney has taken these memorable tunes and turned them into moving vignettes, small slices of life through words, music and movement that make you identify with the actors' plights and predicaments. It's not just the beat or the tune that draws you in. It's the tableau he's painted of "Smokin' in the Boys' Room" that takes us all (even the non-smokers) back to high school again.

At FST, "Leader of the Pack," the only hit for songwriters Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich and George Morton, becomes a tiny operetta reminiscent of "Romeo and Juliet." And Jannie Jones and Jim Weaver's nerdy but sympathetic rendering of "Hey Paula" is bittersweet and funny, especially when it segues into "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?" (the only top 20 song for the Shirelles).

Cardia, Jones, Lindemann and Weaver dance, sing and act their way into our hearts. And their impeccable diction and way of caressing words gives us an insight into these songs that the throat-tearing style of Janis Joplin never conveyed. There is really poetry here. If pop music had been sung like this all along, who knows what might have happened to those of us schooled only in the classics.

There are showstoppers in this show, too. Julia Cardia's rendition of "Harper Valley PTA" was so vibrant and exciting, she had the audience cheering before she'd finished her last notes. And Jannie Jones' heart wrenching "Me and Bobby McGee" was especially affecting.

The quartet, with the elegant one-man-orchestra backup of pianist and musical director Michael Sebastian, flowed from one mood to another, seamlessly. Their dancing matched their excellent voices and their acting was subtle and stylish. Even the sound system worked! The singers wore face mikes but they weren't over amplified. In fact, they just sounded normal. And, in this day of louder is better, that was a treat.

Am I raving? You bet I am. Am I surprised? Shocked. I didn't even think I liked this kind of music but I could have stayed and watched this show all over again. It left me wanting more and, since One-Hit Wonders runs through May 29th, I just may go back and see it a few more times.