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**THE ARTS**

## In the mood for a melody

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Sing us a song, you're the piano man

Sing us a song tonight

Well, we're all in the mood for a melody

And you've got us feeling all right -- "Piano Man," Billy Joel

The title of the musical revue "Piano Men" was inspired by Billy Joel's bittersweet song about a performer who entertains lonely patrons in a corner bar.

But Joel is just one of the singer/songwriters who are celebrated in "Piano Men," which opens this week at Florida Studio Theatre's Cabaret. (Joel, coincidentally, is performing at Tampa's St. Pete Times Forum the same night "Piano Men" opens.)

The revue encompasses Scott Joplin's rags, Fats Waller's jazz tunes, the genius of Ray Charles and the pop and rock sounds of Little Richard, Fats Domino, Barry Manilow and Elton John.

You'll even hear Liberace's version of "Chopsticks."

Richard Hopkins, FST's artistic director, acknowledges he was nervous when the theater held New York auditions for the show.

"We wanted to cast two singer-pianists, but we weren't sure we'd find people who could handle a show like this," he said. "So we were prepared to go with two singers and two pianists."

But Hopkins and Dennis Courtney, the show's director, were elated when David Abeles and Scott Pearson showed up at auditions.

"Both of them have theater backgrounds, and they are great piano men and great singers," Hopkins said. "They have wonderful chemistry, and they bring great energy to the stage."

Abeles and Pearson also have experience working in clubs and lounges.

"That was crucial for this show, because if they hadn't played in those places, they wouldn't have had the grit that's needed for this show," Hopkins said.

"We auditioned lots of people who were very good but who were too refined, too clean. They needed to know what it's like to sing into a microphone 'that smells like a beer,' as Billy Joel says."

**TICKETS**  
**Piano Men**

Opens at 7:30 p.m. Thursday (following preview performances at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday) at Florida Studio Theatre Cabaret, 1241 N. Palm Ave., Sarasota. Through March 25. Tickets are \$19 for previews; \$26 and \$29 for regular performances. Call 366-9000 or access [www.fst2000.org](http://www.fst2000.org).

The cast also includes singer Jannie Jones, who just completed a run on the FST Mainstage in "Ethel Waters: His Eye Is on the Sparrow."

"Jannie has the role of a muse-type character," Courtney said. "She not only represents the women in these men's lives, but she also represents their inspiration. And that's a big theme in the show -- how do people get their inspiration?"

In researching the revue, Hopkins and Courtney found that the piano men shared many characteristics.

"They are all solo artists," Hopkins said. "Some of them have bands, but they always go back to the solo thing. And many of them come from remote areas of the country, rather than places like Manhattan and Chicago.

"They all have rebellious spirits, and most of them overindulged in one way or another."

The rehearsal process for "Piano Men" has been unusual. Abeles and Pearson came to Sarasota in late fall for two weeks of intense rehearsal. They didn't return to work with Jones until last week.

"We brought them in way in advance to learn the arrangements, get the basics down," Hopkins said. "Then we let them go away and absorb it. We gave them incubation time, so they could try their own interpretations."

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