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'Three friends' celebrates folk music

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Trying to define folk music is probably an impossible task. There may be as many definitions as there are songs that could fit in the varied genre.

But most would agree that the music generally deals with the heartland and its people, and songs of protest and peace.

You could quibble about the folk-music credentials of a few songs in "Three Friends, Two Guitars & a Broken Tambourine," and you might wonder why some favorites are missing. But you're not likely to care by the end of this easygoing and tuneful revue at Florida Studio Theatre's Cabaret Club.

The first act generally looks at life and the land, while the second act gets a little more idea-oriented, although the creators sadly avoid getting too pointed with the material.

Best of all, director Dennis Courtney lets his three stars do their jobs without a lot of fuss. Steve McWilliams and Ryan Kipp sing and play guitars or banjos, and Forrest Richards sings and plays that broken tambourine (patched with some black tape).

They simply let the words and sweet harmonies sing and speak for themselves. (They're well assisted by accompanist Jim Prosser.)

The trio becomes a new version of Peter, Paul and Mary or even The Weavers (minus one), and sound best when singing together.

The show offers a hint of the Old West and a love of the land in songs such as "The Fox," "Buffalo Skinners" and "Long Black Veil," which follow the opening, "Take Me Home, Country Roads."

But folk music is also about getting people involved or at least reacting to an issue. Hypocrisy is the subject of "We're All Dodgin'," about politicians, lawyers, doctors and preachers who tell you one thing and do another.

The second act focuses on social change with a more contemporary flair with songs by Bob Dylan, James Taylor and Paul Simon, beginning with "Mr. Tambourine Man" and "The Times They Are a Changin'." (What, no "Blowin' in the Wind"?)

The cast asks, "Have You Ever Been to Jail for Justice?," about standing up for what you believe, and finds the humor in Johnny Cash's "The One on the Right is On the Left," about a group of musicians who don't share the same political views.

Simon's "A Hazy Shade of Winter" brings out some dramatic effects in the lighted backdrop designed by Marcella Beckwith, which takes us from the heartland to the city with the look of rushing cars.

There's a pleasant recurring theme in two songs by Peter Yarrow that talk about the continuity of our lives. "Light One Candle" calls on us to use the lights from Hanukkah as a path to peace as the chorus pleads "don't let the light go out; it's lasted for so many years."

And "River of Jordan" uses the flow of nature to remind us that we are all part of the same world. "We are only one river. We are only one sea. And it flows through you and it flows through me."

It's that spirit that has kept folk music part of our cultural heritage. "Three Friends" may open no new doors, but it pleasantly lets the music carry on.