



Berns musical is very enjoyable

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Derrick Baskin, Zak Resnick and Bryan Fenkart in 'Piece of My Heart: The Bert Berns Story' at Signature Center.

While the song titles "Twist and Shout," "Tell Him," and "Hang on Sloppy" are those that may still be etched in the music sphere of your brain, the name of the writer of the tunes, Bert Berns, may not ring a bell. The high-powered and very enjoyable new musical "Piece of My Heart: The Bert Berns Story" at Signature Center features the composer's music including the title tune made famous by Janis Joplin. Here is a jukebox musical with a real book chronicling his life.

With the exceptions of "Jersey Boys" and "Beautiful," most musicals that have fit into this genre were lacking in the book department. Yet, Danny Goldfarb (who is also a very fine actor), has done an expert job having the storyline move along quite well in an interesting and cohesive manner. And even better is the way all of the songs are easily shoehorned into the musical.

We first see Bert (Zak Resnick) in a flashback as he comes on a stage bathed in purple lighting (excellently designed by Ben Stanton) and begins singing. The handsome and baby-faced Resnick has an excellent singing voice although he is somewhat wooden in the more dramatic scenes. The musical then segues into the present where we meet his daughter, Jessie (Leslie Kritzer), singing in a club on the west coast. Bert died of a heart attack at age 38 when she was only a baby. Kritzer is a terrifically talented performer and it is always a treat to have her on stage. Her rendition of the title song is a complete knockout and every bit as good as Joplin's which is the best compliment I can bestow upon her.

Jesse gets an ominous call from her dad's thuggish boyhood friend Wazzel (a very convincing Joseph Siravo) who wants her to come to New York at the famed Brill Building, which housed music offices and recording studios. Ironically, a lot of the action in "Beautiful" also took place there. When she does arrive, Wazzel informs her that her mother Ilene (played by a fiery Linda Hart) wants to sell her father's music catalogue because she was offered quite a bit of money. Yet, Wazzel knows that Bert would have wanted his daughter to manage it, which causes a further rift between daughter and mother.

That is when we are introduced to Bert as this likable Jewish guy from the Bronx who is determined to get his songs produced. He knows he is a good writer, but needs to get someone to hear his compositions. Right from the start you know that he is not well since he suffered rheumatic fever as a child. His sidekicks are Hoagy (an affable Derrick Baskin) whom he wants to be the lead singer on his songs and the

younger Wazzel (Bryan Fenkart) who gives a standout performance. Wazzel is the street smart wise guy who has the fortitude to want to protect Bert from any type of physical harm or chicanery in the music business.

Bert, who is sexually inexperienced, meets the sultry older woman Candace well played by De'Adre Aziza. When she is about to walk away from him he breaks into one of his hits "I Want Candy." While this may sound a bit hokey, and it certainly is, it does work.

From there he goes onto Havana where at a bordello he gets involved in being a gun runner for the new revolution. This is the only real flaw in Goldfarb's book because it comes across in a sketchy manner. The most interesting part of his time shown in that city is how we see Bern's create his huge hit "Twist and Shout." David C. Woolard's sexy costumes blends in well with Alexander Dodge's jazzy sets with the flashy red curtains for the scenes in Cuba.

It may seem like a great deal is crammed into the show and it is, but Denis Jones who is responsible for some snazzy choreography has also directed in such a fluid way that he tells Bert's emotional and professional journey in a satisfying manner. Also, his idea of having Jesse appear in many of the flashback scenes as an onlooker imagining what transpired in her dad's life as Wazzel narrates, presents an authentic touch to the show.

From there he returns back to the states and meets influential music producer Jerry Wexler (Mark Zeisler) whose friendship with Bert sours after the composer wants to start his own label. Wexler turns smarmy, demanding more of the profits from Bert. The young roughhouse Wazzel physically attacks the producer, which leads to Bern's being blackballed in the music industry. It is natural his name is not well known to many because of his early death and his being blacklisted.

The other cast members do a crackling good job. I especially liked Teal Wicks as the younger Ilene who is very protective of her husband despite his many infidelities. Linda Hart who is always a scene stealer in whatever show she appears in explodes like a piñata with her impassioned rendition of "I'll Be a Liar." This diminutive in stature only star really belts it out to a fevered pitch.

Here is a full-bodied look at a composer whose life was cut much too short. Sadly, what other songs he might have written or how far he could have gone in the music industry will never be known. But all involved have created a potent and vastly entertaining new musical.

Tickets are available at the Pershing Square Signature Center 480 West 42nd Street or by calling 212-244-7529. As of this date, the limited engagement ends Aug. 31.

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