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BY DAVID KENNERLEY

| Have you seen the latest rollicking jukebox bio-musical that showcases hits from the 1960s written by a plucky Jewish songwriter, based in New York's legendary Brill Building, who helped performers become superstars while being forced to stand in the shadows?



Zak Resnick in the title role of "Piece of My Heart: The Bert Berns Story." | JENNY ANDERSON

No, I'm not talking about "Beautiful: The Carole King Musical."

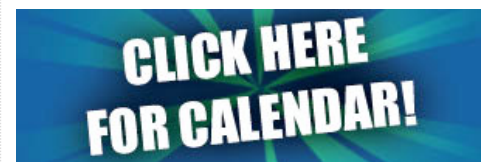
This one's titled "Piece of My Heart: The Bert Berns Story." Unlike King, who finally recorded her own albums that made her a household name, Berns has largely languished in obscurity.

With a book by Daniel Goldfarb, direction and choreography by Denis Jones, and spearheaded by Berns' children, the production is bent on changing that.

Why this gifted songwriter/producer with a nose for the next big thing has remained a footnote is just one of the mysteries contemplated in this lively and enlightening new musical. His roster of pop-operatic hits (some co-written with others) is impressive and includes "I Want Candy," "Hang On Sloopy," "Here Comes the Night," "Tell Him," "Cry Baby," and the titular "Piece of My Heart."

And perhaps his biggest claim to fame is "Twist and Shout," recorded by the Isley Brothers and

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later minted into a global phenomenon by the Beatles.

Yet another jukebox musical, but this one is on a mission

Stricken with rheumatic fever as a teen and told he would not live to see middle age, Berns died in 1967 at 38 of heart failure before he could cement his legacy.

Strangely enough, looming large over the proceedings is the ghost of another songwriter, Jonathan Larson. Not only was Larson also cut down in his prime, the day his “Rent” began its Off-Broadway run, but he wrote an entire musical called “tick, tick... BOOM!” about obsessing over goals at age 30 and seizing the moment — motifs that figure heavily in “Piece of My Heart.”

Not that ticking clocks are the only concern. Refusing to fall into the trap of most jukebox musicals, where the songs are the jewels and the book is little more than the glue that holds them in place, Goldfarb took pains to craft a fact-filled, dramatically rich narrative.

That Berns’ songs are partly autobiographical — heavy on the heartbreak and angst — made it easier for Goldfarb to integrate them into the story. Save for a few clunky transitions, the musical numbers feel organic.

The enthralling story sounds like the stuff of fiction. We learn that Berns got his rhythm and blues vibe from a worldly black woman named Candace (the phenomenal de’Adre Aziza) and his saucy Latin beats from a trip to Cuba, where he did more tequila drinking and gun running for Castro than writing songs. After a mutually rewarding alliance, he has a bitter rift with an Atlantic Records bigwig (Mark Zeisler) who vows to erase his name from music history. Something to do with power grabs and mob hits.

Flash forward three decades, where his daughter Jessie (Leslie Kritzer) struggles to unravel her father’s legacy and convince her embittered mother Ilene (Linda Hart) not to sell the music rights to score a quick windfall.

Under Jones’ inspired direction, the show comes alive with briskly paced scenes of Berns, his thuggish manager Wazzel (Bryan Fenkart), and his young wife (Teal Wicks) in the 1960s, juxtaposed with those of Jessie, Wazzel (Joseph Siravo), and Ilene in the 1990s. The sensational musical numbers, uplifted by zippy choreography, rival anything on Broadway right now.

The cast is top-notch, led by gifted newcomer Zak Resnick as Berns. What he lacks in raw edginess he makes up for with pure, buttery vocals and dreamboat allure. He could be mistaken for Cheyenne Jackson’s younger brother.

There are rough edges. Although the show works hard to weave in some 30 of the 200 songs from the Berns catalogue, many are mere snippets that shortchange the material (“Twenty-Five Miles” would have been a showstopper had they sung it all the way through). Some biographical plot points feel shoehorned and the chronology seems out of whack. And the point about Berns being unfairly neglected is delivered, over and over, with the finesse of a sledgehammer.

Conspicuously absent from this celebration are Van Morrison’s “Brown-Eyed Girl” and Neil Diamond’s “Solitary Man,” which Berns produced under his own label, Bang. Ilene secretly gave up control of the masters. Presumably, “Piece of My Heart” producers were unable (or unwilling) to secure the rights. A little piece of this musical’s enormous heart has been lost.

PIECE OF MY HEART: THE BERT BERNs STORY | Irene Diamond Stage, Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. | Through Aug. 31 | Tue.-Fri. at 7:30 p.m.; Sat. at 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat.-Sun. at 2 p.m. | \$31.50-\$99.50 at ticketcentral.com or 212-279-4200

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