



Cabaret show unites beginnings of American ragtime, jazz

By Bob Evans



For a burst of American known standards polished up and performed by a super-talented cast of six, Quality Hill Playhouse kicks off its new season with songbook standards of the 20s-30s and the Broadway influences of that time.

This year, J. Kent Barnhart opens his Broadway and All That Jazz series with the beginnings of the modern era of American songwriters that includes the famous Gershwins, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and Dorothy Fields were writing the songs that became "standards. Barnhart provides interesting commentary as the show progresses that explains what and how the American standards developed and how the "sinful" new music, Ragtime, was creeping into the American Songbook and how Harlem jazz

helped influence the most popular music being sold in music stores.



The current show features jazz standards like “I’ll Build a Stairway to Paradise,” “Fascinating Rhythm,” “Sweet Georgia Brown,” “Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries,” “On the Sunny Side of the Street,” and “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love,” “Hard Hearted Hannah,” “ as well as classics from Broadway’s “Showboat.” The show title may sound old and dusty, but the music certainly does not. With Barnhart’s combo, including Ken Remmert on percussion and Ben Turvort on bass, three outstanding vocalists Christina Burton, LeTeesha McDonald Jackson, and LeShea Wright belted, crooned, and swung through the musical ditties.



As with all QHP shows, Barnhart includes some music unfamiliar to the masses. So, too, this show brings some surprises. Along with the songs comes the historic background and politics of the era. He pointed to the now racist term “coon songs,” so inappropriate today, but a stylistic favorite of the time when

Ragtime music and the Harlem geniuses crafted new music for the Jazz Age. He explained how the Jewish songwriters frequented Harlem night clubs and stole their rhythms and musical phrases to incorporate with Jewish melodies and created new music for America. He also pointed out how Irving Berlin wrote some very racially charged lyrics, making light of different nationalities.



The historic significance of this show becomes bolder and grander as Barnhart explains and takes the audience deeper into the inner-workings of American music. Call it a musical theory master class. The good news is, no exam at the end.

American popular song during this period also was heavily influenced by African American bandleaders, lyricists, composers, and singers. This revue explores that significant contribution through songs like “Strange Fruit” (made famous by Billie Holiday), Fats Waller’s “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” Duke Ellington’s “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing),” Barnhart said.



Along with the history of American music's development, the importance of Broadway and Broadway shows made major strides forward as they moved from a cabaret and variety show style to the "book" musicals that continue. Ground-breaking shows like "Showboat" and "Porgy and Bess" were introduced to the public. Social issues came to the forefront with these shows. "Showboat" featured an inter-racial love and marriage story about a time with a person could be killed for marriage out of his/her race. Gershwin's opera, "Porgy and Bess" could not be performed in an opera house because the opera did not allow Blacks to perform on its classic White stages.



It was Broadway, the Gershwins, and the team of Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II who challenged these issues and brought them out of darkness and into the limelight. This, too, influenced the Great American Songbook that this season at QHP addresses.

QHP's show will take the audience on a thrill ride with a variety of swing, happy, tragic, and nostalgic musical selections. The three lady vocalists each get a chance to show their stylistic moods to fit their solo performances. As a trio, they are dynamic. Individually, they are stunning. They bring the sass and the heartbreak to their songs.



The show runs through Oct. 28. Tickets and show times can be found by visiting the Quality Hill Playhouse website.

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