

Finding a niche in musical tributes



Penny Skolski as Janis Joplin.

Hippies, peace, flower power, social protest and rock music will forever be associated with the 1960s. Londoners can rekindle the emotion and spirit of the decade when *1967 – Memories of the Summer of Love* returns to the London City Musical Theatre for three encore performances in June. Equal parts musical tribute, nostalgia and trip down memory lane, the show is the creation of Colin Stewart and Chris McHarge co-founders of C2 Entertainment, a Canadian musical theatre company that produces musical tributes.

"Chris and I met in the late 1990s at the Theatre on the Grand in Fergus, Ontario where he was the Artistic Director," recalls Stewart, a much-in-demand London musician. "He hired me as the Musical Director for a production of *Fire*, the musical inspired by Jerry Lee Lewis. After working on a couple of other productions together, we talked about what we perceived as a lack of Canadian-written and produced

musical theatre tributes. To fill the niche, we formed C2 Entertainment and premiered our first production, *Memories of Hank Williams and Patsy Cline*, in November 2000. We haven't looked back since."

C2's tribute shows are aimed primarily at baby-boom audiences. "Our target audience is people 45 years and older who remember the performers and music presented in our tributes. Our goal is to bring musical entertainment to them at an affordable price in comfortable smaller venues," says Stewart.

To date, the pair has collaborated on eight shows, including tributes to the Rat Pack and Las Vegas, Motown, Soul Music, and various Country & Western artists. A new show, *Blue Suede Shoes – Memories of the King*, featuring World Champion Elvis impersonator, Roy LeBlanc, premieres later this summer. The company's peak season runs from the May 24 weekend to Thanksgiving when Ontario summer theatre venues like the Port Stanley Festival Theatre, Showboat Festival Theatre in Port Colborne and Port Dover's Lighthouse Festival routinely play host to their various productions. With the advent of new venues like the London City Musical Theatre, Stewart says the winter months are starting to fill up now as well. In 2007, Stewart and McHarge were the second most-produced playwrights in Ontario – second only to Norm Foster.

A typical show takes about 6 months to develop. Stewart and McHarge flesh out the concept, write the script and build a song-list. After the cast and musicians have been selected, rehearsals follow and the production is workshopped for two weeks and then premiered. "Chris is responsible for what audiences see and hear in terms of dialogue on-stage, while I'm responsible for what they hear in terms of songs and musical arrangements. At present we employ 23 cast members and musicians. I tour with most of the productions in the role of Musical Director."

What can London audiences expect of *1967 – Memories of the Summer of Love*? The two act production is a chronological musical journey through the 1960s beginning with bubblegum rock, then moving through the folk and civil rights movement and British invasion and culminating with a re-creation of the famous 1967 Monterey Festival. Featuring over 35 songs by artists ranging from the Beach Boys, Gerry & the Pacemakers and Peter, Paul and Mary to Simon and Garfunkel, Janis Joplin and the Mamas and Papas, the production is linked by cast dialogue describing the social context behind the music. Over 110 images projected on a background screen further assist the production's narrative component.

Cast members include Paul Wilson, Penny Skolski and Londoners, Natalie Howard and Doug Varty. A well known London musician, Varty says *1967* is a refreshing change of pace for him with its theatrical blocking and set dialogue. Asked to recall his own memories of the Summer of Love, Varty mentions visiting Expo67 on his own as a 14 year-old. "Although it scares me now when I think of it, it seemed perfectly natural at the time," he says. "It really was a different, more innocent time."

Howard, who has been with the show since it debuted in 2004, evokes a number of 1960s female artists like Petula Clark, Cher and Laura Nyro, and she gets into full character for a saucy rendition of Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'." She looks forward to each run of *1967*, and is especially pleased to be performing in London. "I encourage all Londoners – particularly those who lived through it – to come out and let their hair down for two hours and relive the Summer of Love."

Richard Young is a London freelance writer and musician, who remembers hanging out at the old Wellington Square Mall and Victoria Park during the Summer of Love.

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