

A Musical Journey Through the Past: "Smokey Joe's Cafe" at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse

Written by Jill Walsh

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Hey you cats, listen up. I saw a show at Circa '21 that's hoppin' and swingin' – like being inside a jukebox. *Smokey Joe's Café* is where all the cool Daddy-O's and neighborhood gals are dancing to music from the days of the zoot suit up to 1960s love songs. If you're expecting a plot line, a bit of spoken dialogue, you kids won't get it. This musical revue is purely fun. It involves no setup or explanation, and simply celebrates music from days gone by.

Smokey Joe's Café features nine performers and about 40 songs. Without a plot, the production relies heavily on the engaging quality of each song combined with choreography, so plenty of technical aspects are essential to making *Smokey Joe's a* nonstop, lively show.

Quick transitions from number to number help move the show along, and also give it the appropriate quality of listening to a record or radio. A colorful set designed to look like the inside of a jukebox is a nice visual effect and provides the actors with lots of space and levels to move across.

Unique choreography choices, combined with vocal quality and lighting, help set a specific mood for each song. Upbeat songs such as "Charlie Brown," "Dance with Me," and "Yakety Yak" involve the whole company and are washed with bright neutral lighting, focusing our attention on the ensemble. Slower pieces with individual performers such as "Some Cats Know" and "Pearl's a Singer" use spotlights, low-blue lighting, and minimal movement to give a jazzy nightclub feel.

Whether they're singing about love, fame, or money, the ensemble pours all it has into each song. And regardless of lighting, set design, and even choreography, the reason to see *Smokey Joe's Café*

is for the incredible vocal talent of this diverse group of performers. Each musician contributes his or her own unique talent to the show, like instruments composing an orchestra. Crowd favorite Fredena J. Williams has an amazing vocal range that she proudly displays during "Fools Fall in Love" and "Saved." Victor Rodriguez also plays to the crowd with his hip-jiving in "Searchin'," while Zillah Glory Langsjoen shimmies and Joseph Torello provides the bass

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My absolute favorite moments came when saucy Eva D. sang "Don Juan" and "Some Cats Know." Her smooth movements and low, seductive voice put me right in the middle of a New Orleans nightclub.

Though I'd never heard some of the songs on the playlist, most of the top-10 hits had me humming along. (I left the actual singing to the talented performers.) Audiences will love recognizable pieces such as "Stand by Me," "Jailhouse Rock," "Love Potion Number 9," "Hound Dog," and "On Broadway." This lively musical revue will have you happily digging through those old rock-and-roll records at home.

Smokey Joe's Café continues through March 20 at Circa '21 in downtown Rock Island. For tickets or more information, visit (<http://www.circa21.com>) or call (309)786-7733.