

Written by Thom White

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It's hard to go wrong with a musical revue of 70's songs. Okay, actually a *lot* could go wrong: pitch problems, poor song selection, technical difficulties, weak performances. Fortunately, though, the Circa 21 Dinner Playhouse's

8-Track: The Sounds of the 70's

suffered only a handful of pitch issues and a few missed microphone cues on Thursday's opening-night performance, and otherwise mirrored the fun of the decade's music.

A production featuring Circa 21's performing wait staff, the Bootleggers (plus non-Bootleggers Bret Churchill and Tristan Layne Tapscott), *8-Track* starts off with an attempt at a plot, in which a 70's-music infomercial takes over the TV, and home, of a conservative family. But this is dropped fairly quickly in favor of a succession of similarly-themed songs - listed as "tracks" in the program - that cover several genres of 70's music, including disco, love ballads, and, of course, songs of peace. While the show itself drags a tad during a couple of the "tracks" that are filled with nothing but slow-tempo songs, it more than makes up for it in the upbeat segments.

Director and choreographer Jim Hesselman wisely chose to take a fairly minimalist approach to Circa 21's production, allowing the singing to take center stage, rather than the dancing. This surprised me at first, as I thought *8-Track* the Bootleggers' big chance to show off some dance skills beyond the fairly simple choreography used for their usual pre-show entertainments. (That choreography, of course, is simple by design, in that the pre-shows' "casts" change on a nightly basis, depending on which Bootleggers are working that shift.) There are a few big dance numbers here, but in general, Hesselman opts for a more natural interaction with the music; the Bootleggers oftentimes merely sway and deliver a few 70's-style steps as if at a party, not in a stage show. The Bootleggers seem to be having a good time rather than working hard to

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entertain, and it's refreshing, rather than exhausting, for both the performers and the audience.

Anyone who takes in a Circa '21 show now and then is most likely familiar with individual Bootleggers by sight, if not by name, and *8-Track* really plays as a celebration of the men and women many of us have met as they've served our drinks and salads before taking to the stage. The show seems, to me, an opportunity to support these familiar faces as they step it up a notch and sing their hearts out. And that they do in spades.

It almost seems inappropriate to single out any of the performers, because *8-Track* is clearly a team effort - more of a we're-all-in-this-together production than a chance to showcase individuals. And as a whole, the Bootleggers are fantastic in the show, particularly in the tight harmonies and joyous 70's spirit of "Afternoon Delight" and "Lady Marmalade." Still, a few performances are of particular note. Brad Hauskins brings down the house with his rock-style, gravelly-voiced "The Letter." Jan Schmall simply shines on the ballad "Don't Cry Out Loud." Sara Nicks and Ben Holmes melted my heart with their beautiful harmonies on "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face." Sunshine Ramsey uses full-voiced, almost sultry tones on her stellar solos in "Car Wash." And Churchill is pitch-perfect on every note he sings, sending forth a fluid, extremely pleasing sound.

Beyond directing them well, Hesselman allows his cast some clever interactions with the set, which was not built especially for *8-Track*. The show (which plays every Thursday in August) is being performed on the set that's in place for Circa 21's current *Squabbles*, and Hesselman - who also directed *Squabbles* - stages the production so that it smartly incorporates the couches, chairs, and kitchen area of that comedy's living-room setting. (He also provides little interactions that are unaffectedly amusing, my favorite involving Tapscott - offering his typically adorable style of humor - and a troll doll.) All told, its director and performers make *8-Track* a wonderfully fun celebration of both the music of the 70's and Circa '21's Bootleggers. The performance plays out like a party to which we're all invited, with friends we (sort of) know and love.

For tickets and information, call (309)786-7733, extension 2, or visit Circa21.com.

Thom White covers entertainment news for WQAD Quad Cities News 8.