

'Smokey Joe's Café' serves it hot

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Anna High, center, sings to a philandering "Hound Dog" in Smokey Joe's Café with Rachelle King and Chelly Canales at Littleton's Town Hall Arts Center.

Littleton's Town Hall rocks Lieber and Stoller

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Although the songs in *Smokey Joe's Café* were never intended to be the core of a Broadway musical, the words and music are as theatrical as anything.

When vivacious Anna High belts out "Saved" at Littleton's Town Hall Arts Center, it is everything a black gospel number should be on the secular stage—both reverent and irreverent, with the sin of Saturday night meeting the histrionic penitence of Sunday morning.

The irony that this gospel shouter was written by Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, both white East Coast Jews, confirms the song as a tailor-made character study penned by admirers.

Smokey Joe's Café, the longest-running musical revue in Broadway history, is comprised of nearly 40 songs from the catalogue of Lieber-Stoller, two of the most important songwriters from the era when 1950s R&B was re-invented as rock 'n' roll. The team was so adept at

capturing the perspective of both urban blacks and white teenagers that the two cultures become nearly interchangeable in songs like “Youngblood” and “Yakety Yak.”

If the two had worked on Broadway instead of the nearby Brill Building, they could have written musicals without much tweaking of the material. As the two would half-joke in later interviews, the songwriters thought of themselves as black— “sadly mistakenly,” as they once said.

A case in point is “Hound Dog,” a gritty kiss-off Lieber and Stoller wrote for blues shouter Big Mama Thornton in 1953, three years before Elvis Presley reversed the perspective and turned slang about philandering into—arguably—a far ruder novelty song. Thankfully, the *Smokey Joe* version—again nailed by High in Littleton—sticks with Thornton’s original.

Other show highlights include a gutsy “I’m a Woman” [yes, a proto-feminist anthem penned by two men], a gospel-tinged version of “Stand By Me,” and “Poison Ivy,” perhaps the only song about venereal disease to successfully hit the Top 40.

Director Matthew Peters understands that the songs are the stars of the show and limits the “acting” to vocal phrasing and loose narratives that sometimes connect the songs. Besides High, the standout vocalist is Alejandro Roldan, whose street-corner lead on “Youngblood” is far more than stoop worthy. Likewise is Jacob Villareal’s “Spanish Harlem.”

It may be fortunate that no attempt was made to forge an actual story from the songs, whose interconnected references to New York City work well with the downtown backdrop. A few brief narrative vignettes are sprinkled throughout the song and dance.

Still, one has to wonder why the show virtually ignores—save for a brief interlude—the highly visual story song that gives *Smokey Joe’s Café* its name. “Riot in Cell Block No. 9” would have also been a natural prison-break lead-in to “Jailhouse Rock.”

“Neighborhood” is the only sore thumb in the show, and it cannot be helped. The latter-day Lieber-Stoller nonhit becomes a recurring theme and sounds more like something from *Rent* than the rootsy R&B the musical celebrates.

Roldan’s “On Broadway” would perhaps be a more fitting thematic transition from the New York barrios to the mean street that made and killed the theatrical careers of many.

To paraphrase, Lieber and Stoller did not quit until they were stars on Broadway.