



FIRST-RATE JUKEBOX JAM: (left to right) Levi Kreis, Robert Britton Lyons, Corey Kaiser, Eddie Clendening, Lance Guest in *Million Dollar Quartet*. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

Superb *Million Dollar Quartet* chronicles historic 1956 jam with Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis, Carl Perkins in Memphis

Million Dollar Quartet

Book by Colin Escott and Floyd Mutrux

Directed by Eric Schaeffer

The Nederlander Theatre

208 West 41st Street

(212-307-4100), www.milliondollarquartetlive.com

By Scott Harrah

The only type of "jukebox musical" that truly ever works is one rooted in reality, such as *Jersey Boys*. The same can also be said for the surprisingly solid *Million Dollar Quartet*, which just opened at the Nederlander. This 90-minute show, a hit in Chicago, has made a smooth transition to Broadway, and for good reason. It has an excellent cast of talented actors and musicians playing American rock royalty and singing their cherished standards, and a biographical storyline that's based on a venerable night in music history.

On December 4, 1956, Sun Records founder Sam Phillips (Hunter Foster) brought together the musicians he discovered, and hosted a jam session at the record label's humble Memphis studio. This might seem mundane, but the rockers Phillips nurtured just happened to be Johnny Cash (Lance Guest), Elvis Presley (Eddie Clendening), Jerry Lee Lewis (Levi Kreis), and Carl Perkins (Robert Britton Lyons). By late 1956, all four musicians were already household names, many of whom were about to sign on with bigger labels, but they all shared something in common: each got his start at Sun Records.

Unlike so many "jukebox musicals," which feature half-baked plots that are often an excuse to simply weave established pop hits into a narrative, *Million Dollar Quartet* is a look at a piece of rock history, with genuinely sincere performances and true-life drama. Its hit songs, from "Blue Suede Shoes" to "Great Balls of Fire" and "I Walk the Line," actually have something to do with the story as each was a song created by a Sun Records star. The fact that these songs are all rock classics is simply an added perk.

The two strongest performances here are from Hunter Foster as Sam Phillips and Levi Kreis as Jerry Lee Lewis. Foster brings a winning mix of both ego and vulnerability to the record-label boss, portraying Sam Phillips as a frustrated man who has a hard time accepting the fact that he must professionally break away from the musicians whose careers he helped start. Levi Kreis as Jerry Lee Lewis is exceptional, from his manic mannerisms and gool ol' Louisiana boy accent to his on-target imitations of the rocker's showboating gymnastics while singing and playing the piano.

Lance Guest may not look much like Johnny Cash, but he certainly sounds like the singer with his bass-baritone voice. Eddie Clendening has the show's toughest job portraying Elvis. Clendening has the King's down-home good looks, but fortunately he does not try to impersonate the iconic legend. (Any attempt to do so would have easily come across as a one-dimensional caricature, like in so many bad Elvis look-alike contests.) Instead, Clendening focuses on making Elvis believable, and when Sam Phillips tells the

King to let us hear his soul while singing, Clendening delivers in Presley's trademark mellifluous tones.

Only the people that were actually in that Memphis studio back in late 1956 really know what happened that night, so book writers Colin Escott and Floyd Mutrux obviously took some liberties with the story. The character of Elvis's date for the evening, a voluptuous woman simply known as Dyanne (Elizabeth Stanley), may or may not have actually been part of the jam session, but she is here, singing "Fever" and "I Hear You Knocking." Some historical accounts claim the woman actually with Elvis that night was one Marilyn Evans, a Las Vegas showgirl. A recording was indeed made on December 4, 1956, featuring the four stars and the voice of a woman, but whether the female vocals belonged to Ms. Evans is something for musical historians to debate.

Regardless, *Million Dollar Quartet* is wonderfully entertaining. The four actors performing don't just give great performances; they are also top-notch singers and musicians, and that is vital in a show like this.

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Broadway and Off-Broadway Listings



MILLION DOLLAR QUARTET: (from left) Foster, Kreis, Lyons, Clendening, Guest. Photo: Joan Marcus



MILLION DOLLAR QUARTET

What makes *Million Dollar Quartet* so enjoyable isn't that it's a rock-and-roll musical. The real joy is witnessing a jam session by four giants of the music industry that specialized in rock. Set in December 1956 at the Sun Records studio in Memphis, Sam Phillips (Hunter Foster) brings together, for one night, all the guys back to the place where Johnny Cash (Lance Guest), Elvis Presley (Eddie Clendening) Jerry Lee Lewis (Levi Kreis) and Carl Perkins (Robert Britton Lyons) got their start and made recordings. You get everything from "Blue Suede Shoes" to "I Walk The Line," "Riders In The Sky" to "Great Balls Of Fire". What makes the evening such a delight is that all four men portraying these legends are believable. Not just pretending to be them, but *are* them. They all have the voices down, and are first-rate musicians as well. Mr. Kreis as Jerry Lee Lewis is brilliant, as is Mr. Guest vocally as Johnny Cash. If you are a fan of

this type of music, you will not be disappointed. The goods are delivered, and the finale jam session will absolutely knock you out.

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