'Smokey Joe's Cafe' features music legends, The Coasters

Twentieth anniversary production comes to Brooks Center on Clemson campus

By Paul Hyde
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They created some of the most memorable classics of 1950s rock 'n' roll.

But how many people actually know the names of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller?

"Smokey Joe's Cafe," a 1995 Broadway revue, sought to shine a new light on the songwriting duo by bringing together 40 of their big hits, including "Kansas City," "Hound Dog," "Jailhouse Rock" and "There Goes My Baby."

The 20th anniversary national tour of "Smokey Joe's Cafe" comes to Clemson's Brooks Center on Tuesday.

The new production, which won rave reviews when it was unveiled at Long Island's Gateway Playhouse, features another music legend, The Coasters.

"The reason we asked The Coasters to join the show was because eight of the songs were written for The Coasters," said Bill Weir, producer of the new staging.

"We thought it would be a great way to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the show," he said.

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COASTERS

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Among the Leiber-Stoller tunes originally written for The Coasters, and included in the show, are "Yakety Yak," "Charlie Brown," "Poison Ivy" and "Searchin'."

The four men touring under The Coasters name carry on a tradition that began in 1955. None of the original members of the group remain.

Lead singer J.W. Lance, who has been with The Coasters since 2001, said that appearing in a stage show with a cast of 13 is a new experience but the group members are having the time of their lives.

"Usually when we're performing we don't have a break between songs, but 'Smokey Joe's' gives us a chance to breath," Lance said. "We love doing it."

The show, powered by an onstage band, also is introducing young people to a host of rock 'n' roll classics.

"We're appealing to a lot of young people," Lance said. "As I look around, I feel this music really is coming back alive. The people respond so spontaneously to the songs. It's wonderful to see."

The 20th anniversary production was directed and choreographed by Chet Walker, who earned a Tony nomination last year for choreographing the hyper-kinetic Broadway revival of "Pippin."

The original 1995 Broadway production of "Smokey Joe's Cafe" racked up 2,036 performances, making it the longest-running musical revue in Broadway history.

Among the other popular Leiber-Stoller songs in the revue are "Stand By Me," "I'm a Woman," "Love Potion #9" and "Fools Fall in Love."

"Smokey Joe's Cafe" offers a unique take on some familiar rock 'n' roll standards, such as "Hound Dog," sung by a woman in the bluesy style of Big Mama Thornton, who embraced the tune before Elvis.

Throughout the 50s and perhaps since that time, Leiber and Stoller's songs — and the singers associated with them — were far better known than the songwriters themselves, Weir said.

"Leiber and Stoller were the most prolific rock 'n' roll duo out there and they were just putting out hit after hit," Weir said. "A lot of people knew the Drifters or they knew Elvis but they didn't necessarily know that behind those performers were Leiber and Stoller."



e Coasters will perform in the 20th anniversary national tour of "Smokey Joe's Cafe."

YOU CAN GO

What: "Smokey Joe's Cafe," featuring The Coasters
When: 8 p.m. Tuesday
Where: Clemson University's Brooks Center
Tickets: $35 adults; $15 students
Information: 864-656-7787 or www.clemson.edu/Brooks