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'Million Dollar Quartet' to heat things up this Sunday at the Keith-Albee theater

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Coincidence or no, when Million Dollar Quartet began its 2014 tour it was -10 degrees in Peoria, but since night after night of stage-sizzling "Great Balls of Fire," the temperatures have been soaring across the country.

"We kicked off in Peoria and it was 10 below. We're in Paducah now and it's mighty nice; it's 50 degrees but it feels like 70, and we might have to go to the beach," said John Countryman, the 24-year-old firecracker of a piano player who plays Jerry Lee Lewis.

Causing temperatures to rise in every town they stop in, it's the nationally-touring Broadway musical tour of "Million Dollar Quartet," that kicks off the spring semester of the 77th season of the Marshall Artists Series with a night of rock 'n' roll and Memphis soul at 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 26 at the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center, 825 4th Ave., downtown Huntington.



Cody Slaughter stars as Elvis Presley in "Million Dollar Quartet," which will be performed as part of the Marshall Artists Series at 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 26, at the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center.

Photo courtesy of Paul Natkin-
The Herald-Dispatch



Tickets are \$65.06, \$56.50 and \$51.15 and on sale now through the Marshall Artists Series box office, online and by phone.

For those who don't know the story, "Million Dollar Quartet," follows the serendipity-filled day of Dec. 4, 1956 when Sam Phillips and Cowboy Jack Clements were recording Carl Perkins in the Sun Record Studios in Memphis, Tenn. A young Jerry Lee Lewis was pounding out some keys for Perkins who'd already had a big hit with "Blue Suede Shoes."

Fellow area residents, and soon-to-be-superstars Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley happened to stop by. An impromptu jam broke out and although the Memphis newspaper tabbed the sessions "the Million Dollar Quartet," the recordings of the famous 17-song session were not released until 1981 in Europe, then more tracks were found and released as "The Complete Million Dollar Quartet Sessions" in 1990 in the U.S.

Countryman, a home-schooled piano player who grew up in North Carolina and who now is based out of Annapolis, Md., said it has been a dream come true as a young, energy-filled Jerry Lee disciple to get to star in the rockabilly riot that is "Million Dollar Quartet."

"I have been pretty lucky the way the show works," Countryman said. "It is telling the story of it all and then after we go out and do the bows we go into a four-song encore and they bring everybody out, Johnny and Elvis and Carl Perkins and they let me come out and do 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On,' and I end up on top of the piano hollering and have a whole lot of stuff going on. It's real show biz and a whole lot of foot playing, and people want to see that happen and see me putting my foot up on the keys and I am more than happy to do that."



Countryman said whether you're a big-time Memphis and rockabilly fan or not, you'll love the music, that features such now sing-a-long staples as "Blue Suede Shoes," "Ring of Fire," "That's All Right," "Sixteen Tons," "Great Balls of Fire," "I Walk the Line," "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," "See Ya Later, Alligator "Fever," "Folsom Prison Blues," and "Hound Dog."

"If you like any of these guys or like that music it is a must-see. You've got to come to the show because it's a fantastic, upbeat show," Countryman said. "If you don't know anything about these guys it is really like the best educational experience learning about all of these guys with the backdrop of kick (expletive) rock 'n' roll."

Written by Floyd Mutrux and Colin Escott, the stage musical which dramatizes the Million Dollar Quartet session premiered at Florida's Seaside Music Theatre and was then staged at Village Theatre in Issaquah, Washington (a Seattle suburb) in 2007.

In 2008, the show went to Chicago's Apollo Theater and by April 2010 it started a run (that ended after a year and two months) on Broadway.

Since then the show has been Off-Broadway, in London's West End, in Vegas where it opened last February, and then touring the country spreading that infectious Sun Studio-washed gospel, bluegrass, county and blues.

This current incarnation of the tour, rehearsed in New York City in September, started their tour at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and is crisscrossing the country through June 26.

Although only a twentysomething, Countryman, who grew up in a small North Carolina town between Charlotte and Raleigh-Durham, said once he heard the piano playing of Jerry Lee Lewis as a teen it was all over but the shouting.

"I started playing piano when I was really young. My mom's a music teacher and I took lessons and didn't get into it because if your mom wants you to play piano that is the last thing you want to do," Countryman said. "When I started playing seriously as a teen she was a big Elvis fan but she was like 'you need to listen to Jerry Lee' and that was all she wrote. I was going down and getting those live \$5 CDs from Wal-Mart and absorbing all that I could get my teeth into."

Countryman, who played keys in a rock band in Maryland before taking on his first national tour, said that there is something so special about Lewis' playing and spirit that bowls him and audiences today over.



"Everything I play has a little taste of Jerry Lee," Countryman said. "It has that kind of soul, and when you talk about soul music he was that kind of soul that marched to the beat of his own drum and there's something special about what he does. He isn't the most technical player, and not the flashiest but something about the way he plays, and I don't know what it is, but it has that certain something that makes you want to get up and move. He feels it and he is putting all of himself into it."

Countryman said as a musician it's also amazing to be in a show that captures a historic moment that many people equal to The Beatles playing the "Ed Sullivan Show." The Sun Sessions not only saw them singing bluegrass, gospel and country but singing songs by many of their African-American contemporaries such as Chuck Berry, at a time when America was wrestling with race issues.

"All of these guys grew up in straight up poverty and for them music was in a lot of ways an escape and a release," he said. "A lot of these guys were hanging out with black folks and singing gospel and R&B because it was a sad point in our culture that you couldn't have a black man singing, so here you had the white kids portraying what was going on in the music and they could bring that to a larger population to show people what was going on."

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