

ENCORE THEATRE SHAKES IT UP WITH “THE MILLION DOLLAR QUARTET”

by [Hugh Gallagher](#)

Sat, 02/03/2018 - 4:30pm

THEATER & DANCE | REVIEW



The Million Dollar Quartet +1 rocks its way through the Encore Theatre. Photo by Michele Anliker.

Whole lotta shakin' goin' on at the Encore Musical Theatre in Dexter as the way-back machine takes us to Dec. 4, 1956, when Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash came together for the first and last time as a quartet.

The Colin Escott-Floyd Mutrux jukebox musical *The Million Dollar Quartet* is less a historically accurate presentation of that day than an all out celebration of these four seminal figures in the history of rock 'n' roll and Sam Philips, owner of Memphis' Sun Records and their mentor, producer and father figure (though only a few years older).

Elvis was by then the biggest star in show business and a recording phenomenon for RCA Records. On Dec. 4, Presley and a woman friend made a visit to the place where it all began and ended jamming with his old friend Carl Perkins and a brash young piano player and future star named Jerry Lee Lewis. Seeing an opportunity for publicity, Philips called his current star, Johnny Cash, to come on down for pictures. Cash stayed for only a short time.

In reality, the three and back up musicians played standard pop tunes, sentimental country classics, some rhythm and blues, and a few of the gospel songs that helped create the sound of rock 'n' roll. In this version, Cash stays and most of the music is drawn from the early songs that the artists made famous.

Philips tells the story of how the four young men came to work for Sun Records and how his faith in them helped make them the men and stars they became.

Director [Tobin Hissong](#) re-creates that atmosphere of spirited competition, career anxiety, and sheer joy in the

music that must have lit that small studio like a rocket. The cast is pitch, howl, and wiggle perfect.

Perkins and Lewis were the true musicians in the foursome. The former was a virtuoso guitar player, obsessed with getting it right. The latter, a flamboyant and masterful boogie-woogie piano player.

Alex Canty plays the tightly wound Perkins. He plays excellent guitar and portrays the quiet, retiring personality that never quite rose to the heights of the other three despite his talents as singer, songwriter, and guitar player. Canty does some fine singing on "Who Do You Love," "My Babe," and "See You Later, Alligator." Perkins' biggest hit, "Blue Suede Shoes," is a matter of contention when Presley records a cover version that becomes better known.



Jerry Lee Lewis (Marek Sapieyevski) does a whole lotta shakin' in *Million Dollar Quartet*. Photo by Michele Anliker.

Marek Sapieyevski lets loose as the untamed and untameable Jerry Lee. He is outrageously funny as he postures, brags and rips through rhythm and blues tunes with fearless abandon. Sapieyevski is a wild man at the piano and captures Lewis' patented style of dancing from his piano seat before finally letting it all out by kicking the bench away and banging with joy. He also does a great job of showing Lewis' funny but scary side. He lets it rip on "Great Balls of Fire" and "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," as well as providing verbal and musical commentary for the other numbers.

Stephen Shore is Johnny Cash. Cash was older, had a family and, at the time, was deeply religious. Shore gives Cash that older brother solidity. Cash was also more a country singer than a rocker and here Shore comes through on Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues" and "I Walk the Line," at that time a huge breakthrough hit for *The Man in Black*.

That leaves, um, oh yes Elvis (no last name necessary). Elvis had a charisma that defined the word. He was handsome, playful, humble and yet commanding. Josh White finds that energetic young Elvis, before a string of bad movies, forgettable songs, weight problems, and Las Vegas. White gives us the real Elvis with just a touch of Vegas Elvis. Like the original, White sings with those slurs and trills and wails that were not exactly the sound of black rhythm and blues singers but a more youthful and uncontrolled homage. White also moves and dances in those shakes, wiggles, and pelvis thrusts that shocked and delighted a nation. He rips through "That's All Right" and "Long Tall Sally."

The woman that Elvis brought with him was a former girlfriend and dancer. In this version the woman's name has been changed and she is a singer. This gives Kaitlyn Weikel an opportunity to offer up good renditions of two songs, the Peggy Lee hit "Fever" and the early rock song "I Hear You Knockin'." She is also a source of

comfort and sympathy for the tensions in the room.

Jim Walke is a solid and sometimes funny Sam Phillips. It's really his story, his success that ultimately is taken from him as his great stars go on to bigger things than the small Sun Studio. Walke has just the right amount of good old boy and wise old man.

The set by Thalia Schramm and Greg Brand is an eye-opening re-creation of Sun's small studio, right down to a period perfect control room. You really feel that you are there when history happened.

Everybody knows the rest of story. Elvis would continue to be a star, but his act would fade with the rise of The Beatles and Bob Dylan. He would become frustrated with the movies and Vegas. He would die young. Johnny Cash would have his troubles, too, but he would have the longevity and opportunity to choose his own material that Elvis never had and became an icon of American music.

But that was later. Dec. 4, 1956, was a happy day, indeed.

And, yes, the tapes were rolling.

Hugh Gallagher has written theater and film reviews over a 40-year newspaper career and was most recently managing editor of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers in suburban Detroit.

"The Million Dollar Quartet" continues Thursdays through Sundays until Feb. 25 at the Encore Musical Theatre, 3126 Broad St., Dexter. To purchase tickets, call 734-268-6200 or visit theencoretheatre.org.

[Sign in to comment](#)

Welcome to Pulp!

Here you will find excitement and appreciation for the Ann Arbor area's arts & culture scene and all it has to offer - from our loveliest galleries to our grungiest basement venues. Check in for previews, thoughts, critiques, reviews, dorky puns, opinions, observations, and heads-ups on what's happening in the area from professional journalists, community contributors, and your very own AADL staffers.

Pitch to Pulp: pulp@aadl.org

Ann Arbor District Library, 2018. All text [CC-by-NC](#) unless otherwise specified.

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)