
Theater: The Beatles On Broadway! (If Only)

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LET IT BE ** ST. JAMES THEATRE

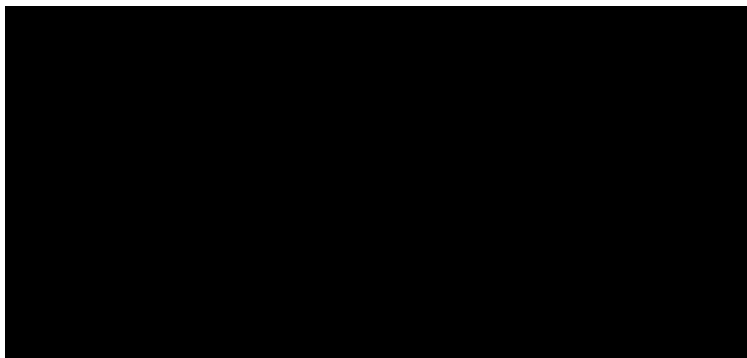
I've never quite understood the appeal of tribute bands. If John Fogerty is around (and now willing to play CCR songs), why would you go see a covers act? Even though ABBA won't tour ever again, it seems, why check out someone in silly costumes aping the act? *Mamma Mia* I understand -- you enjoy the songs, the show is silly and no one is actually pretending to be ABBA. And ironically, the closer they get to the real thing, the less satisfying it proves to be. If you really love a band, the most satisfying cover is one that reveals a new twist on a beloved classic, not a careful imitation of the original.

Nonetheless, any band big enough and popular enough is bound to inspire tribute bands, whether you're Pink Floyd or Led Zeppelin or whomever. Seeing a Beatles tribute in the 1970s was just sad, since all the lads were still around. But now that two are gone and a reunion is an impossibility, I guess something like *Let It Be* makes more sense. Sure you could -- and should -- catch Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr on their victory laps. But if you long for a Beatles reunion and you've already watched *A Hard Day's Night* and *Anthology* repeatedly, what's the harm in heading to Broadway and catching this concert cum tribute? None, really, though I think you'd have more fun spending the money on a Mono boxed set and diving into their music on your own.

You won't be surprised at the set-up when the curtain rises. Brick walls and a rough feel let you know you're in the Cavern Club. The low-rent scenic design by Tom McQuillen-Wright (who was probably given about a \$50 budget, so let's not blame him) doesn't get any better. *The Ed Sullivan Show* is hinted at by some arrows, Shea Stadium by a police barricade in the background and so on. Some kudos for the sound design by Gareth Owen; the modest flubs (a microphone not coming up at the beginning of a line) let you know the actors were performing live, though sometimes aping the playing of their instruments and often sweetened by backing tracks and an almost constant murmur of applause.

For the first act, the proceedings were perfunctory and obvious. The lads did a few songs, jumped forward a year or two in time (while banal commercials and other clips set the tone for the era) and then did some more. It was very rote and my reaction was the exact obvious of what I expected. I assumed I would be shrugging at first and slowly won over a bit simply because the songs are so great. (I'm no trivia expert, but a serious fan nonetheless of the greatest band of all time.) In fact, the simple early songs were the easiest to get across. As the tunes grew in complexity and emotional depth, the actors on stage were more and more out of their depth. The between song banter was harmless if so derivative it could have been written on auto-pilot. By the time of *Sgt. Pepper*, they seemed adrift and the pre-recorded arrangements mimicking orchestras and the like sounded tinny and forced.

But it's the Beatles. A ripple of pleasure went through the crowd just at the mention of "Yesterday" and, by God the songs are good even if the performances were so-so copying of brilliant originals. Still, I wasn't looking forward to the second act.



Then a curious thing happened. They dumped the lock-step chronological approach and the lads came forward for an acoustic set. There were Paul (Graham Alexander, by far the strongest voice), George (John Brosnan, modest of voice but delivering a note-perfect solo on "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" that was the musical high point), and John (a far too clownish Reuven Gershon; his singing started out weakly but got stronger towards the end). So there they were at the front of the stage, all holding guitars. Paul sang "Blackbird" then John sang a song and then George and so on. You didn't know what song was going to come next because they jumped back and forth in the catalog. It surely didn't matter what song they sang because actual duds practically don't exist in their body of work (some minor B sides and a few tunes on *Yellow Submarine* aside). The show wasn't trying to duplicate the original arrangements so much for that brief section. And for a moment, I actually thought, gee, what if the Beatles had toured again and did an acoustic set and they just did this song and that song, trading tunes back and forth? How great would that be? It was a brief daydream, a glimpse of what would never be and for just a second I enjoyed myself.

Then it was back to the note for note renditions of classic songs. I wouldn't underestimate the challenges they faced in singing and performing many of these numbers. It certainly sounds kind of sort of like the Beatles in a way, if you squint and don't pay too much attention. It just isn't very fun to hear a pale shadow of an original rather than just play the original itself. Far better for a real tribute band to take a cue from that unplugged moment. Do a Beatles tribute that avoids imitation and actually creates fresh arrangements. What if the Beatles had gone on MTV and did a show? What would it sound like? How could they put a fresh spin on their songs?

Of course, the Madame Tussauds tendency of a show like this is not for originality but a Xerox copy, one that has some smudges but allows people who can't ever see the original get an idea of what it was like. I suppose, though *The Beatles In Mono* boxed set would be far more satisfying and turn any casual listener into a real fan.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **

La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice no stars
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical no stars
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **
Let it Be **

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