

Regional Reviews: Albuquerque/Santa Fe

Regional Reviews

Patsy Cline is Stellar 'Walk' Down Memory Lane with Bright Local Talent

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Not everyone had the pleasure of growing up with the music of Patsy Cline, born Virginia Patterson Hensley in 1932. Lucky for all of us that her music lives on in recordings, which help to preserve the memory of her artistic brilliance, talent and passion. I first became familiar with Patsy Cline's music by hanging out in cabarets in Manhattan and then gradually picking up CDs of her music here and there. I'm by no means a Patsy Cline connoisseur, but I think she is wonderful nonetheless. Having missed the myriad Patsy Cline tribute shows that have popped up in recent years, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to see Landmark Musical's production of *A Closer Walk with Patsy Cline* which opened in Albuquerque at the University of New Mexico's Rodey Theatre on October 8. The show, with book by Dean Regan, Cline's widower, chronicles Patsy Cline's rise to fame from a popular singer in her hometown of Winchester, Virginia, to the welcoming warmth of the Grand Ole Opry to the bright lights of the Vegas strip and ultimately New York's Carnegie Hall.



Laurie Finnegan

While categorized as "musical theatre," let's be real about what this show is. It is more of a concert than a musical or even a play with music. There is very little along the lines of a book, but the songs are strung together with brief narrative that lets the audience in on the what, where and whens of Cline's life. Apparently for last Saturday night's subdued audience members, most of whom appeared to be old enough to remember Cline when she was alive (she died in an airplane crash in 1963 while en route from Kansas City to Nashville after a benefit concert), the lack of plot didn't really matter as it was a nearly two-hour walk down memory lane.

While effectively executed, the show, which has the values and professionalism of an Off-Broadway production, seems dwarfed by the size of the Rodey Theatre. Its actors undoubtedly give robust performances, but their efforts and energy seem to be sucked up by the vast UNM theatre venue. Perhaps a thrust stage setting with a more intimate feel would have been better. This is the kind of show one needs to experience up-close and personal, but I understand the need for a larger house to accommodate the size of the crowds that a production such as this can draw.

Myers Godwin's set is not complex, but definitely imaginative. It simulates a larger than life jukebox in which the lion's share of the action takes place. This is very fitting considering that Cline's songs are the most played in jukeboxes all over the world. Within the box's confines are three raised platforms: One for the band; one for the backup singers; and one center stage, replete with a painted floor that resembles a giant record album, from which Cline sings most of her songs. There is also another smaller set piece stage right, which is a cutaway of a radio station disc jockey's desk, with a working "On Air" sign.

The rivet that holds this production of *A Closer Walk with Patsy Cline* together is Albuquerque performer extraordinaire Laurie Finnegan, who reprises the role for which she garnered much praise in a previous production. A natural fit for Cline, Finnegan possesses a balanced amount of spunk and heart, a recipe for a believable Cline. The Patsy Cline songbook is difficult both vocally and emotionally, and Finnegan nails it. While it's always clear that her portrayal is a tribute rather than a carbon copy, she is fully connected to the material and gives a performance that proves that she is, indeed, a consummate actor and performer. Her stamina throughout the show is incredible, and her renditions of "Faded Love," "Your Cheatin' Heart" and "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" are quite poignant. Finnegan makes chart toppers like "Walkin' After Midnight," "Crazy" and "I Fall to Pieces" unmistakably her own.

A member of the "Hee Haw" Generation, or at least the tail end of it, I found myself most connected to the show as I relived fond memories of the hillbilly variety show, singing along with "jack-of-all-trades" actor William Lang and his rendition of "Jimmy Crack Corn," the song my father used to whistle and sing all the time when I was a kid. Lang plays the radio host who spins a Patsy Cline tribute for his listeners. A versatile and engaging performer, Lang narrates Cline's journey by playing various comedians and MCs at venues where Cline performed throughout the years. He provides the comic relief needed between numbers.

While most of the songs are ballads, there were a handful of upbeat tunes, which help to lift the audience's spirits, including a rousing and inspiring rendition of "Bill Bailey" toward the end of the show. Musical Director John Clark has assembled a top-notch band which helps to keep the pacing of the show lively.

A talented barbershop quartet, consisting of Ron Bronitsky, Michael Finnegan, Tim MacAlpine and Patrick Alan Robinson, serves as backup for Cline. I remember sitting around the television with my family in the early 1970s watching variety shows, thinking I'd love to be one of those swaying, finger-snapping vocalists with amiable and enthusiastic expressions on their faces. All four singers capture that spirit and bring back a lot of memories of a less-complicated time when shows like "Lawrence Welk" or "Hee Haw" could inspire a child to dream.

Kudos to costumer Dean Eldon Squibb, who gave Ms. Finnegan one of the most fabulous and glitzy wardrobes I have ever seen on stage—from her red sparkly prairie skirt with white fringe to her chocolate brown cocktail dress. The quartet's costumes, while not as diverse or extensive as the star's, are brilliantly functional and help place the audience damn smack in the early 1960s where men were proud to wear silver glitter-covered bandanas around their necks.

The staging by director Zane Barker is necessarily simple, since too much direction would overpower the music, which is the real star of the show.

In spite of its book problems and locale, *A Closer Walk with Patsy Cline* is an entertaining night out. And, with all those great tunes, how could you not love it? I may not have made a career as a June Taylor dancer or backup singer for Andy Williams, but I still know how to snap my fingers and reminisce. You'll want to too!

A Closer Walk with Patsy Cline continues through October 24 at UNM's Rodey Theatre. For more information, call 505-453-8844, or visit www.landmarkmusicals.com.

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-- Paul Niemi