



Sipping my coffee and surveying a late-night crowd at tables littered with dinner debris, I felt I really was hanging out at a low-lit café run by some guy called Joe.

Smokey Joe, that is — not Joe Zingo, director of Actors Cabaret's latest production, *Smokey Joe's Café, The Songs of Lieber and Stoller*. For this show, Actors Cabaret has been transformed into a haunt for blues and rock lovers (though it legally must be smoke-free).

Smokey Joe's is obviously better suited to an intimate cabaret setting such as ACE than to a plain theater stage. The nine-member cast delivers an energetic, comical, shimmying evening with a revue of famous hits like "Hound Dog," "Jailhouse Rock," "Charlie Brown," and "Stand By Me."

Sitting less than 20 feet away from the ensemble allows you to feel the energy, even though the show takes off slowly. But it gains momentum. Slipping from one song to another, the actors take on a dozen different characters as they bop and slide and jostle their way through years' worth of rock 'n' roll phenomena. There's an enormous amount of talent in this cast and each member shines in the spotlight, but Erica Jean Pierson emerges as the discernible female star, rollicking as a pastor trying to win over a street bum (Gaylord Walker) in "Saved."

One after the other, the songs make your

chest fill with laughter, your emotions rise, your toes tap with delight and then, your throat ache as you float with melancholy longing. It's impossible to listen to Lieber and Stoller and not immerse yourself in nostalgia — whatever your age.

Precisely because its nostalgia is not for a particular age but for all ages, *Smokey Joe's* works best when not explicitly trying to play to the 1950s. Lieber and Stoller's songs don't need overt '50s props because their appeal lies in their timelessness. You could do "Hound Dog" in an Elvis suit or tights and leg warmers or a thong, and it would still be a disdainful yelp against betrayal. And so ACE's production itself becomes a hit when it stops referring to the poodle-skirted, sweater-vested era and lets its singers belt and dance out their songs in collective sequined gusto. *Smokey Joe's* is about rock 'n' roll and loving and laughing and longing — things that remain very much our business now.

My only gripe was that at times the stage lighting, especially spotlighting, cast deep shadows on actors' faces, giving a slightly hollow-eyed look to some actors stage left.

Originally debuting on Broadway in 1995, *Smokey Joe's Café* became the longest running musical revue in Broadway history. Eugene audiences may try to convince its own Joe, of ACE, to keep going on this one, too. **ew**

A C E
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