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Photos provided

The touring production of “Smokey Joe’s Café” featuring The Coasters makes a tour stop Saturday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

The sounds of *Smokey Joe’s Café*

Production featuring The Coasters to stop Saturday at the Mendel Center



The Coasters will perform as part of “Smokey Joe’s Café” on Saturday at the Mendel Center. The group recorded many songs by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, whose music fuels the show.

IF YOU GO

What: “Smokey Joe’s Café” featuring The Coasters	2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor
When: 8 p.m. Saturday	How much: \$48-\$60
Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre,	Contact: 927-1221 or www.lmcmainstage.org

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO
HP Features Writer

BENTON HARBOR — “Smokey Joe’s Café,” the longest running musical revue in Broadway history, has always been a love letter to Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller.

The legendary songwriters wrote or co-wrote more than 70 Billboard chart hits, ushering in the rock ‘n’ roll era in the 1950s and early 1960s by penning songs for Elvis Presley — including “Love Me” and “Jailhouse Rock” — as well as tunes for The Drifters, Ben E. King, The Clovers and Peggy Lee. But it was The Coasters that recorded the most Leiber and Stoller songs. The seminal band made hits out of 24 Leiber and Stoller gems, including “Charlie Brown,” “Searchin’,” “Yakety Yak” and “Poison Ivy.”

When Paul Allan, the managing partner of The Gateway Performing Arts Center in the Long Island town of Bellport, N.Y., decided to revive “Smokey Joe’s Café” for its own season as well as a national tour, which makes a stop Saturday at Lake

Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, that connection between Leiber and Stoller and The Coasters led to a remarkable idea.

“When it debuted on Broadway it was immensely popular, so when we decided to revive it and take it on tour we wanted to do something special with it,” Allan says by telephone from Long Island. “Since a lot of songs in the show are songs by The Coasters, we thought, ‘Hey, wouldn’t it be a coup if we could get The Coasters to actually perform them in the show?’”

So Allan reached out to Veta Gardner, the widow of original member Carl Gardner, who holds the rights to the name, and has kept The Coasters going with new members, and inserted the band in its “Smokey Joe’s Café” production.

“The challenge was how do we integrate these guys into a show that already has an ensemble of nine members who in previous productions sings all of these songs,” Allan says. “We wanted to pay homage to The Coasters

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SMOKEY JOE'S

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and allow them to be featured but still be 'Smokey Joe's Café.'"

Trying to improve upon a show that ran for 2,036 Broadway performances, was nominated for seven Tony Awards in 1995, including Best Musical, and won a Grammy Award in 1996, was a daunting task. So Allan brought in Tony Award-winning director and choreographer Chet Walker, best known for his work with Bob Fosse.

In its original incarnation, the show, which is in a revue format with no unifying theme or dialogue, features 39 songs presented by various members of the nine-member cast. In this version, the cast of Nik Alexander, Malcolm Armwood, Keely Beirne, Yvette Clask, Erin McGrath, Caliaf St. Aubyn, Vaden Thurgood, Robert Fowler and Kathleen McCann is occasionally joined by The Coasters primarily singing their own hits.

"We wanted to introduce The Coasters early," Allan says. "The first song in the show is called 'Neighborhood,' and the original intention was to have the nine ensemble members sing it. Three-quarters of the way through the number the music swells and The Coasters makes their entrance and sing a verse. It introduces them in a cool and unique way to make them part of the group, and it works that way throughout the play.

It's not so much that you feel like you're at a Coasters concert, but enough so that everybody sort of gets what they want."

Allan says The Coasters – whose roster features Dennis Anderson, Primo Candelaria, Eddie Whitfield and Joe Lance Williams – do sing one additional song not in the original production. Ironically, it's the title song, "Smokey Joe's Café."

"When it went to Broadway, just one verse of 'Smokey Joe's Café' was attached to another song," Allan says. "Since we had The Coasters it seemed like a great song to give them, so in the second act they sing the full version of the title song."

In addition to The Coasters' hits, the show features classics such as "On Broadway," "Hound Dog," "Fools Fall in Love," "Spanish Harlem" and "Jailhouse Rock." The Coasters and the cast are augmented by a six-piece band, led by musical director Todd Olson, performing live on stage.

For Allan, this production has come together in a way that pays tribute to Leiber and Stoller, The Coasters and the original show itself in its 20th anniversary season.

"The music is incredible," Allan says. "It's such a great collection of songs that are universally known and loved. This show seems to appeal to everybody and it felt like it was time to get this thing out again in front of people."

Contact: jbonfiglio@TheHP.com, 932-0364, Twitter: @HPBonfiglio

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