

Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller met as teenagers in Los Angeles in 1950, and bonded over their love for blues and rhythm music. The two white, Jewish musicians quickly discovered that they had a knack for writing pop songs for black singers. Leiber and Stoller merged the rhythm and blues of the black entertainment world into traditional pop music and created a phenomenon. They wrote for acts such as the Drifters, the Coasters, Elvis Presley, and Big Mama Thornton. Their legacy is immortalized in the musical revue *Smokey Joe's Café*, which features over 30 songs of Leiber and Stoller from the 1950s and 1960s.

*Smokey Joe's* provided an opportunity that Amy Baker Schwiethale, associate professor of Musical Theatre at Wichita State University, noticed her students were missing. Many Wichita State graduates were booking entertainment gigs; such as cruise ships, where performances consisted of singing a list of songs.

“It’s true entertainment,” said Schwiethale, who directed and choreographed the show, “It’s not about the journey of a character, and that’s okay. It’s about captivating the audience and holding them in the palm of your hand.”

Since its Broadway debut in 1995, *Smokey Joe's Café* has received criticism, despite winning the 1996 Grammy for Best Musical Show Album. The lack of plot and dialogue in *Smokey Joe's* bodes as monotonous, so it falls to the cast and their performance.

“Transitions are important, but you have to let the cast make it their own,” Schwiethale said. “It was crucial that the cast to find their own way into the songs, and discover what it means to them.”

Schwiethale, personally, can remember her parents playing records inspired by Leiber and Stoller in her childhood home, and even then they were “throw-back tracks.” To explain

such an iconic time in popular music and how it contributed to whatever contemporary pop is today, fifty to sixty years later, to a twenty-something can be difficult.

The cast, featuring nine musical theatre majors (Keshana Cook, Da'Merius Ford, Dylan Harris, Brittnee Hill, Amanda Huehl Phillips, Deiondre Teagle, Melvin Thampy, Madi White, and Naaman Williams), were asked to imagine that this was a review of '80s and '90s music, such as Michael Jackson or Boyz II Men. This helped the young cast understand the nostalgia of the songs of *Smokey Joe's* and the importance of authentic characters. The characters often break the fourth wall to engage or connect with their audience, and the cast learned how to do so without seeming awkward or cheesy. Schwiethale studied popular dance movements of the time and taught them to the cast, adding another level of spectacle for the audience.

The audience dives into a high-energy concert atmosphere when walking into *Smokey Joes' Café*. They are invited to snap, clap, and groove along to the music and react to the singers on stage, which in turn will feed off the energy of the audience. The result will be pure entertainment, and for some, a trip down memory.

“Some students at KCACTF may not know this music, and that’s okay. It’s an honor to present it to them,” said Schwiethale.

Wichita State University will be performing *Smokey Joe's Café* on the mainstage of the Ames Center on Wednesday, January 20<sup>th</sup> at 7:30 pm. Amy Baker Schwiethale directed and choreographed the show, with musical theatre major Jennie Hughes serving as Assistant Director. Musical direction is by School of Performing Arts alumnae Phil Taylor. The design team for *Smokey Joe's Café* includes: Associate Professor David Neville (Set & Production Stage Manager), Assistant Professor Cate Wieck and her assistant designer Elizabeth Eckrote

(costumes), and Design & Technical Theatre majors Alyce Murphy (lights) and Marlo Griffith (sound).