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Jersey Boys is set to open on Oct. 17 for a nearly two-week run in Spokane. JOAN MARCUS PHOTO

The Other Fab Four

Five decades after its inception, the acclaimed musical *Jersey Boys* gives The Four Seasons its due

BY E.J. IANNELLI

The Four Seasons were certainly no one-hit wonder. The New Jersey quartet had a string of Top 40 singles like “Sherry” and “Walk Like a Man” — songs that are now embedded in the pop music lexicon and staples of oldies stations. The group’s “Big Girls Don’t Cry” has been used in films to evoke the zeitgeist of an entire decade. “December, 1963 (Oh, What a Night)” is a dance floor warhorse that keeps getting a new lease on life through routine remixes.

So would it be right to say that the Four Seasons were big? Big with a capital B? Big like the band’s contemporaries, the Beatles?

No, the Seasons never quite made it to that league. To their detriment, the foursome spent its early years being shelled by the British Invasion. Clearly they had no trouble writing ear candy that moved millions of records, but their music was of a different mold, one that already seemed familiar to ears on this side of the Atlantic. No

matter how high Frankie Valli’s vocals reached, the Four Seasons’ music lacked the aura of exoticism that so enthralled American listeners at the time.

And so the Fab Four garnered the limelight while their doo-wop counterparts, although not exactly obscure, never ascended to the same enduring level of music stardom.

Things began to change in 2004, more than 40 years after the Four Seasons first came together in its classic incarnation of Frankie Valli, Bob Gaudio (who had a pre-Seasons hit with “Short Shorts”), Tommy DeVito and Nick Massi. The musical *Jersey Boys* — written by Gaudio along with other award-winning song- and scriptwriters like Marshall Brickman (of *Annie Hall* fame) — cast the group’s legacy in an entirely new light.

The musical melded the group’s most recognizable songs with the tale of its largely blue-collar roots and tumultuous career arc. Although *Jersey Boys* was inevitably branded with the dreaded “jukebox musical” label — that

...continued on next page



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CULTURE | THEATER



"THE OTHER FAB FOUR," CONTINUED...

is, a new production that dramatizes an existing pop soundtrack — it managed to avoid the usual pitfalls of the genre.

Shortly after the musical's debut in La Jolla, Calif., the audience of *Jersey Boys* morphed from die-hard Four Seasons fans into casual theatergoers who crammed sold-out shows of extended runs. In 2005, the year it made the move to Broadway, *Jersey Boys* won four Tony Awards and a Grammy. In subsequent years, it would pick up international prizes in the U.K., Australia and Canada.

Ron Melrose, the music director of *Jersey Boys*, whose efforts helped the production walk away with some of those awards, says recognition of the band is long overdue.

The Four Seasons "were guys from the wrong side of the tracks at a time when that wasn't desirable," he says.

"Remember, they were doing their hits — 1963 was 'Sherry' and 'Big Girls Don't Cry'

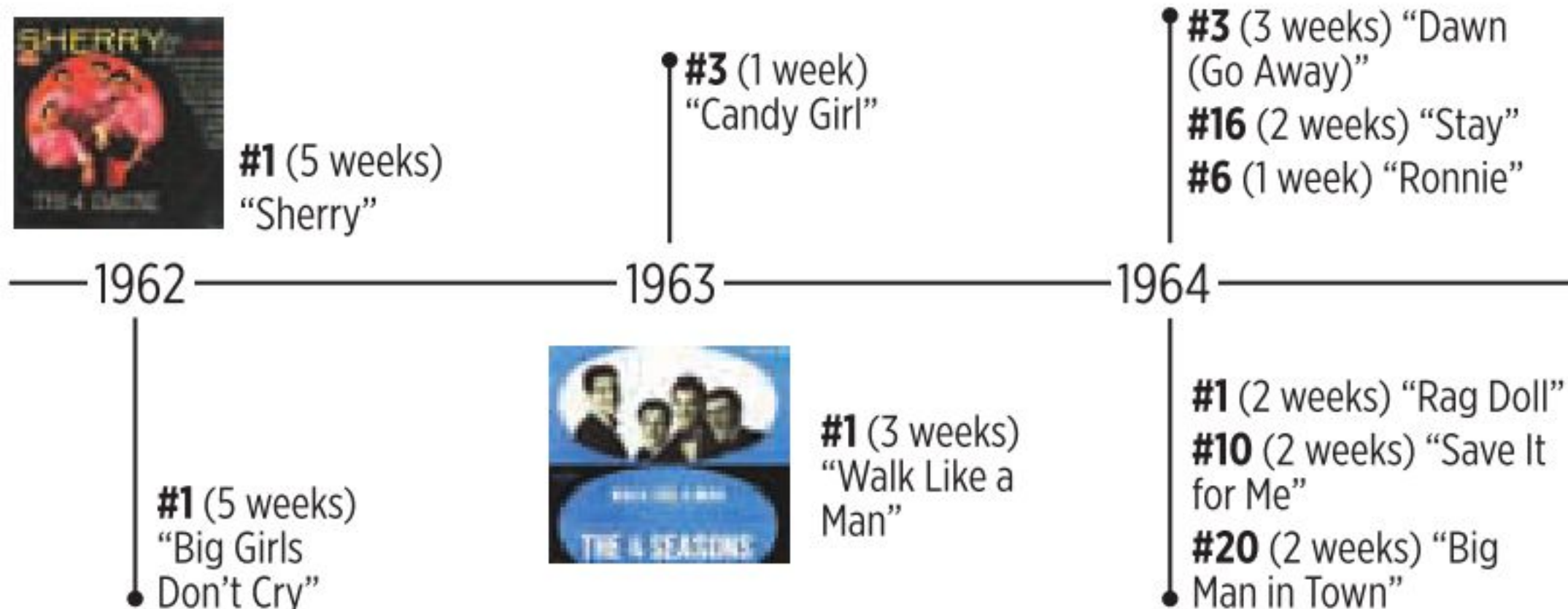
and 'Walk Like a Man' — right when the Beatles were happening. So we were in an aspirational time. We were in a fascinated-with-foreigners time. Everything that was British was gold," says Melrose.

"But my father-in-law," he adds, "who is a bit older than I am, says, 'The Seasons were what we listened to and loved while we were waiting for the next Beatles album to come out.' And they had number-one and top-five songs at a time when the other four of the top five were all Beatles hits."

In fact, Melrose would venture one step further. He maintains that "while the Beatles were taking us on mushroom trips," the Seasons were speaking to the whole of working-class America.

"There's a speech in [*Jersey Boys*] which basically says, 'We weren't the songs for the guys that skipped out of fighting. We were the band for the guys that shipped out. And their girlfriends. And that girl behind the counter at

THE FOUR SEASONS' HIT LIST





Since its debut in 2004, *Jersey Boys* has become a touring juggernaut, reviving interest in The Four Seasons. JOAN MARCUS PHOTO

the deli. And the guy flipping burgers. Those were our people,” says Melrose.

As resilient as the Four Seasons’ music has proven to be, the songs couldn’t simply be cut-and-pasted into the book. They had to be interwoven into the story and adapted to suit the new narrative context.

“Anytime you’re dealing with material that was written for another medium, in order to use that for storytelling, you find that adjustments need to be made,” says Melrose. “If the director says, ‘I need this to bounce a little more, I need this to be a little harder,’ then that’s just what you do. You’re here to serve the play.”

He points specifically to the tempos of some of the earliest Four Seasons songs. “We couldn’t simply recreate those records,” he says. “We live life faster today. We needed to put more of a drive to keep the story in the air.”

Such changes haven’t always gone down well with the band’s ardent fan base. Melrose estimates that “there are about 10 percent of that kind of die-hard” and zealous fan, yet there are “90 percent

that are so thrilled to have the Seasons front-and-center in the public consciousness that they forgive us and understand our variances. You see the show and go, ‘That wasn’t 13 songs in act one. That was one toboggan ride through 13 songs.’”

► SCHEDULE CHANGE

The show’s run has been cut by a week. Those who bought tickets for after Oct. 28 will be contacted by WestCoast Entertainment for a refund or exchange.

That toboggan ride has resulted in enough awards and audience appeal to offset any grumbling from purists. In the seven years since *Jersey Boys* hit Broadway, there have been as many as eight companies performing the musical at once – at one point the production featured a roster of 32 Frankie Vallis.

Melrose says it all comes down to a compelling story and pop music that has stood the test of time.

“When I’m looking at the row in front of me, and there are two teenagers and they’re bopping to the music, and mom and dad are holding hands, and grandma’s smiling, that’s the key to the piece,” he says. “This music is universal.” ■

***Jersey Boys* • Oct. 17-28, show times vary depending on date • INB Performing Arts Center • 334 W. Spokane Falls Blvd. • \$32.50 to \$132.50 • www.inbpac.com • 1-800-325-SEAT**



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“Let’s Hang On”

#9 (1 week) “Working My Way Back to You”
#13 (1 week) “Opus 17 (Don’t You Worry ‘Bout Me)”

#9 (2 weeks)
“C’m on Marianne”

#3 (2 weeks)
“Who Loves You”

#16 (2 weeks)
“Beggin”

#9 (1 week) “I’ve Got You Under My Skin”
#10 (1 week) “Tell It to the Rain”

#1 (3 weeks)
“December, 1963 (Oh, What a Night)”



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OCTOBER 11, 2012 **INLANDER** 29