

Holly resurrected in vivacious musical 'Buddy'; Show would be perfect if it were all music and no story

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Bay Area Living

By Chad Jones, STAFF WRITER

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IF "Buddy," the theatrical tribute to legendary rock 'n' roller Buddy Holly, consisted primarily of songs and energetic production numbers, it would be a four-star, must-see event.

The music generated in "Buddy," which opened Wednesday at San Francisco's Post Street Theatre, is thrilling. The last half hour of the show, which re-creates Holly's final concert before he was killed in a wintry 1959 airplane crash, is as fun and rousing as anything you'll see in a Bay Area theater.

In a star-making role, Travis Poelle plays Holly, the Lubbock, Texas, native who in only 18 short months managed to create a pop music legacy that still reverberates today.

Listening to Poelle sing Holly songs such as "That'll Be the Day," "Not Fade Away" or the lesser-known "Words of Love," it's easy to hear how Holly helped shape the kind of music that we would be listening to for the next few generations.

With Holly's trademark black-rimmed nerd glasses, curly dark hair and sharp suits, Poelle bears a striking resemblance to the late singer, and vocally he resurrects the famous Holly twang and hiccup (a-hey, a-ho) without doing a forced, carbon-copy imitation.

It's a joy to watch talented, charismatic Poelle inhabit Holly for 2 1/2 hours, and it's even better to listen to his voice and guitar enliven Holly's hits. It's just too bad that "Buddy" takes its subtitle, "The Buddy Holly Story," so seriously. In addition to giving us Holly's music, the show attempts to re-create key moments in his short life.

In theory, this is just fine, but if you want excellent biography, the 1978 movie "The Buddy Holly Story," starring Gary Busey in the title role, more than fits the bill.

"Buddy" writer Alan Janes gives us a conventional stage bio that tries to be thorough but can't help being cursory. He wants to give us a sense of Holly as a human being -- the man behind the legend -- but delivers a weaker version of "VH1 Behind the

Music."

Director Stephen Moorer's production has flash and sass, but there's a certain clunkiness to the non-musical sections that comes from more than just unimaginative writing.

Jean-Francois Revon's rolling platform sets are noisy and lumbering without being especially effective, and when not singing or playing, the performers prove to be better musicians than actors.

Cut most of the talking and "Buddy" would be bang on. Musical director Don Dally, who also performs in the show, and sound designer Thomas R. Craft rev up the show to concert levels whenever Buddy and his band kick into gear.

Whether in the recording studio or on stage at Harlem's Apollo Theatre, Buddy and the Crickets (Luke Darnell as bassist Joe Mauldin and David Schulz as drummer Jerry Allison) wail through number after number.

During the final Clear Lake concert, Buddy is joined by J.P. Richardson aka The Big Bopper (Scott Free) and Ritchie Valens (Davitt Felder), the other two singers killed in that fateful plane wreck.

It's also during this concert that "Buddy" hits its highest notes. The entire cast is on stage singing and playing. At one point the band features 12 players (including an accordionist), six guitars and eight back-up singers.

If it's a little bit Vegas-meets-"Happy Days," that's OK because it's a lot of fun. On opening night, audience members were literally dancing in the aisles.

The emotional highlight of the show is a musical moment, but a private one. Before he leaves for what will be his final concert tour, Holly sings an acoustic version of "True Love Ways" to his new bride, Maria Elena (Lucinda Serrano). It's a tender moment Poelle performs beautifully.

The great thing about "Buddy" is that it allows us to appreciate Holly anew. His music sounds as fresh in 2004 as it did, and you have to wonder what he'd be doing if he were alive -- at age 68 -- and making music today.

Holly's premature death was a pop culture tragedy, one that Don McLean immortalized in "American Pie" when he described it as "the day the music died."

But an even bigger tragedy would be if Holly were ever forgotten or his music ever really died.

Yeah, that'll be the day.

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Oh, boy, 'Buddy' rocks best as nostalgia concert

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DAILY DATEBOOK

Robert Hurwitt

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RATING: (POLITE APPLAUSE)

Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story: Musical biography. Songs by Buddy Holly. Book by Alan Janes. Directed by Stephen Moorer. (Through July 11. Pacific Repertory Theatre at Post Street Theatre, 450 Post St., San Francisco. Two hours, 30 minutes. Tickets \$25-\$63. Call (415) 321-2900 or visit <http://www.buddyrocks.com>).

Rave on, Buddy Holly. The man died tragically young, but his songs -- his ground-breaking, rocking tunes and the words of love he wrote to go with them -- simply will not fade away. Nor should they, as "Buddy," the musical biography that opened Wednesday at the Post Street Theatre, so bountifully demonstrates.

No, it doesn't live up to its subtitle, "The Buddy Holly Story." The biographical element, though pleasant enough, is pretty sketchy and neither elegantly nor inventively told. But the song list is one Holly gem after another -- 15 of them, with a few other rock classics thrown in, brilliantly performed by Holly ringer Travis Poelle, guitar whiz Don Dally and the rest of the cast.

As a play, it's ... well, pleasant. But as a concert with a biographical through line, "Buddy" rocks.

It's certainly acquired a good track record. Alan Janes' biodrama as nostalgic rock concert -- based on an idea by Laurie Mansfield, with additional material by original director Rob Bettinson -- opened in London in 1989 and played the West End for 12 years. A Pacific Repertory Theatre version played to sold-out houses for an extended run in Carmel last year, then moved north to repeat the experience as a co-production with San Jose Stage Company before returning for another hit run in Carmel.

Pac Rep founder Stephen Moorer has significantly improved his staging for the run that opened Wednesday at Post Street, with Holly's widow, Maria Elena Holly, in attendance. Produced in association with San Jose Stage, it's been slightly streamlined with the elimination of a few minor characters and a couple of songs, cutting about 10 minutes. The new set, a '50s juke box-meets- Jetsons decor by Jean-Francois Revon, looks much sharper with Mark Gilmore's early rock-concert lighting effects (also new) and Tandy Messenger's apt, flashy '50s rocker costumes (from the earlier production).

The cast is stronger as well, though what really counts is Poelle's dynamic repeat performance in the title role and musical director Dally's hard-rocking bands and sweet backup singers. The story is confined to Holly's rise from promising country artist in Lubbock, Texas, to rockabilly pioneer with a succession of hits with the Crickets -- the first rock group to write its own material, and the first white group to play the Apollo -- to the famous last concert with Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper before the fatal plane crash on "The Day the Music Died."

Newcomer Lucinda Serrano is an engagingly sweet Maria Elena in a meet-cute scene. Tom Donald is a genial Hipockets Duncan, an early Holly supporter whose radio commentary provides necessary narration - - though he pushes too hard for comic effect -- and fellow new arrival Jesse Caldwell is sharp as Holly's breakthrough record producer Norman Petty (with Lyn Whiting repeating her beguiling stint as his keyboardist wife).

It's not the acting but the music that's the heart of the show, though. And here, "Buddy" soars. Luke Darnell and David Schulz are terrific as the other Crickets. The new Valens, Davitt Felder, delivers an electric "La Bamba," and Scott Free (one of the few other holdovers in the cast) is a buoyant reincarnated Big Bopper on the crowd-pleasing "Chantilly Lace." Apollo singers Kalene Parker and Daniel Simpson make potent contributions. Matt Davis is a comic doo-wop delight on "Why Do Fools Fall in Love."

More than anyone else, Poelle carries the show -- beautifully supported by Dally's vibrant lead guitar (he plays a mean bluegrass fiddle as well). Poelle doesn't try to replicate Holly's every inflection and vocal gymnastic. But he suggests them, performing with a verve that delivers Holly's passionate musicianship. He looks like Holly, and he rocks out irresistibly on "That'll Be the Day," "Peggy Sue," "Not Fade Away," "Oh Boy," "Maybe Baby" and many more - - executing Chuck Berry-like duck-walk duets with Dally (minimal but apt rock choreography by Sheri Bouwens).

One hit follows another in the second-act version of the last concert, building dynamically to an overwhelming "Rave On," "Johnny B Goode," "Oh Boy" finale. With a playlist like that, how could a show lose? Rock on.

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PHOTO (2); Caption: (1) Travis Poelle delivers the goods playing early rock n roller Buddy Holly in a biographical music show at the Post Street Theatre., (2) Lucinda Serrano as Maria Elena Holly and Travis Poelle as Buddy Holly share a sweet moment in the musical tribute Buddy.

Oh-ee-oo, he looks just like Buddy Holly: Free show Saturday at Virgin Megastore

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BUDDY Holly will make a rare appearance this weekend. Actually, it's actor Travis Poelle playing Holly, something he does nightly in the musical tribute "Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story" at San Francisco's Post Street Theatre. The free appearance of Poelle and other cast members is at noon Saturday at the Virgin Megastore, Market and Stockton streets in San Francisco (just outside the Powell Street BART station). Poelle, along with Luke Darnell and David Schulz as "The Crickets," will perform Holly standards such as "Peggy Sue," "That'll Be the Day" and "Oh Boy." Call (415) 397-4525 or visit <http://www.virginmega.com> -- Chad Jones Come to the fair Summer fair season is upon us, and Berkeley's annual Live Oak Park makes its 34th annual appearance this weekend. From 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, the fair features continuous live jazz provided by the Jazzschool, freshly made foods such as Indian crepes and coconut juice and 120 booths of arts and crafts.

Fair proceeds support Wavy Gravy's Camp Winnarainbow, the Jazzschool and KPFA radio. Live Oak Park is at 1301 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley. Free shuttles run between the park and the North Berkeley BART station. Visit <http://www.liveoakparkfair.com> -- Chad Jones Sludge guitar The Professor Sludge Guitar Academy presents its newest generation of rock stars Sunday at San Francisco's Great American Music Hall. Forty budding rockers, ages 8 to 18, play a benefit for Hearing Education and Awareness for Rockers (HEAR), a nonprofit group working to raise awareness about the dangers of exposure to excessive noise levels from music. The lineup includes Curiously Strong, a quartet of 12-year-old girls covering Joan Jett and No Doubt; Brain Freeze, a Rolling Stones cover band featuring two brothers and a sister ages 10 to 15; and Barking Gizzard, a band that just released a full-length CD of original songs. Barbara Tolbert, a high schooler with a powerful voice and arresting stage presence, is the featured singer in the band Schwank. Eric Lenchner, aka Professor Sludge, has played in Bay Area bands Orquesta Limbo (1976-78), The Readymades (1977-80), The Dinos (1986-93) and The Ultras (1987-95). He founded the Professor Sludge Guitar Academy in 1997 when hearing damage forced him to retire from live performances. Sunday's show is at 7 p.m. at 859 O'Farrell St., San Francisco. Tickets are \$20 for adults and \$12 for children younger than 18. Call (415) 478-2277 or visit <http://www.gamh.com> To learn more about HEAR, visit <http://www.hearnet.com> or call (415) 409-EARS. -- Sarah Resnick

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