



Holly musical recalls rock great's life and music

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Cape musician Robert Chandler – known everywhere, he says, as R.C. – sings and plays guitar with his '50s band Daddy-O! a few times a week. “Any night, anywhere I play,” he says, “I always get requests for Buddy Holly songs.”

Even if they've played some, the requests still come – for hits like “Peggy Sue” or “That'll Be the Day” or more obscure choices. From baby boomers, from 20-somethings or from 12-year-olds.

“What it is with all of his songs is that nothing is hidden, it's right there, it's very simple to understand,” R.C. says. Teenagers, he's found, know Holly's music better than any other recording artist from the '50s, even Elvis. “It supersedes age groups. It's timeless. ... Every single one of his songs we relate to immediately.”

Perhaps that also helps to explain the success of “Buddy – The Buddy Holly Story,” a musical revue/biography billed as “the world's most successful rock 'n' roll musical.” Premiering here at Harwich Junior Theatre through March 20, the show has been playing around the world for 22 years, according to its website. It has played often enough, in fact, that there are actors who specialize in the title role.

When director Mary Arnault was trying to cast the HJT production, she simply went on the website and found a host of resumes. The choice was Eric Labanauskas, a Midwest performer who last played Holly in Wisconsin and will reprise the role in April in Indiana.

Labanauskas is a huge Holly fan who has visited sites related to Holly's final concert and the plane crash in 1959 that killed him at age 22, along with the Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens (immortalized as “the day the music died” in Don McLean's 1971 song “American Pie”). In the show's program notes, Labanauskas thanks Holly for “music that never fails to get people to dance in the aisles, even some 52 years later.”

That dancing is just what Arnault is aiming for at HJT: “I think this show keeps going around because the music is so infectious,” she says. “It's just so fun to listen to.”

The script doesn't spend time on Holly's musical childhood in Texas. R.C. says Holly's life, and music, changed after seeing Elvis Presley perform – from western music to rockabilly and “pop” – and the period from 1956 to 1959 is the focus of “Buddy.”

Arnault says the musical offers a show and two concerts: Act 1 concludes with Holly with his band the Crickets at The Apollo Theater in New York City; Act 2 re-creates Holly's final concert, including songs by other artists.

Beyond Labanauskas, all the other musicians in the 14-member cast are local.

Liam Hogg, a drummer with Randy and the Oak Trees and other bands, had hoped to be involved but had a scheduling conflict. He has been working on adding Holly tunes to his rockabilly repertoire, though, and has been listening to a lot of his music. “His stuff is so great,” says Hogg, 39. “You know all of his songs.”

He believes a play like “Buddy Holly” is “so great because hopefully it will get some people out there to hear where it all came from,” he says. “He was one of the originals.”

Despite his short life, Holly was important in music history beyond his string of hits. Arnault and Hogg note his Crickets were the pioneer for small bands after years of singers having a lot of musicians backing them up.

Back then, “it was radical to have a three-piece band and make your own sound,” Arnault says, noting Holly also experimented with making his own recordings.

R.C. notes that no matter the song topic, Holly's performing style was “nonthreatening,” as if “he wanted to be your friend and he wants you to understand him.”