

# A New York Weekend to Remember by Ken Charmer

**When I booked to visit New York and take in the hit musical 'Jersey Boys' I had read so many reviews I didn't envisage there would be anything else left to say. But this was a very special weekend. As well as "JB' there was a meeting with long term Seasons fans George Juba and our favourite former Time Magazine writer Charles Alexander to look forward too. Tagged onto that were more first time meetings with my 30 year Four Seasons pen pal Karen and the lovely Jean Thomas-Fox lead singer of the female 'Four Seasons'- the Rag Dolls.**

So you might say it was a challenging weekend, meeting so many great people for the first time. Well yes, it was immense!... but when you add in Jersey Boys and the worst blizzard in New York since records began in 1860...it achieved 'historic' proportions. As Charles Alexander wrote me recently, "I've lived in NYC for almost 30 years and yet I missed the biggest snowstorm in the city's history by catching what was virtually the last plane, taking off for Florida before the storm. Yet you experience this bit of Big Apple history on such a short visit. Life is funny, isn't it?"

Somehow New York wanted to make up for me missing opening night and the unique fans party that followed back on November 5th. Battling through the February snow to the Saturday night showing of Jersey Boys made it a true pilgrimage, after all we had been relaxing in our Spanish home in temperatures of 60 degrees plus a few days earlier. Now that I have recovered from the whole experience I can see an importance to this musical play that was not apparent before my visit. Sitting in the mezzanine amongst the bubbly, excited New Jersey folk created a sense of excitement and anticipation. But nothing prepares you for this show. Whether your older generation that grew up with this music, or younger and you grew up with it on your par-



ents hi-fi, there is something captured in this play that could never have been achieved if it had been done in any other form.

Nobody summarises the show better than Martin Denton in his NY Theatre Review:

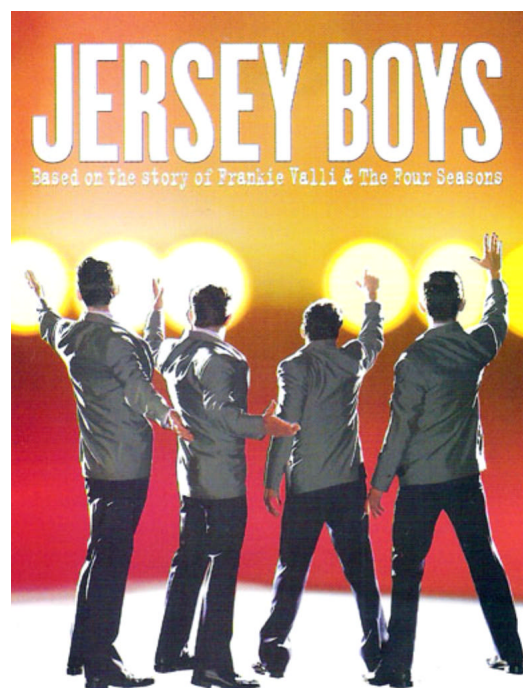
"OK, so there's this kid, Frankie Castelluccio, and he sings like an angel. An angel. He's living in the suburbs in New Jersey, destined to be a barber, until he meets Tommy DeVito, a savvy hustler with a guitar and a vision.

Tommy's the guy who can get Frankie (and himself) out of Jersey. Nick Massi, another guy with a musical gift, joins up with them, but trios are out, quartets are in. Where's the fourth man for the group? Little Joey Fishes (that's Pesci—yeah, that Joe Pesci) finds him, a prodigy named Bob Gaudio; Frankie's wife Mary tells him to spell his stage name with an "i" at the end instead of a "y" (that would be: Valli); and the neon sign of the Four Seasons Lounge gives them their new name. Gaudio writes songs—can he come up with the smasheroo hit that will give Frankie and the boys their own distinctive sound and turn them into superstars? You bet he can. After loads of false starts, he pens a thing that goes

She - e - e-e-e-ry baby (Sherry baby)She - e - rry, can you come out tonight

And the rest, as they say, is history.

And that, my friends, is the first 45



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minutes of Jersey Boys, Broadway's new hit musical. And I mean hit: we're talking positive vibes exploding around the room like hyperactive—

radioactive!—jumping beans; a room full of people on stage and in the audience so jazzed and so in synch with the unabashed delight of the thing that they can hardly contain themselves, so that when Frankie and Tommy and Bob and Nick finally break through with "Sherry," the audience cheers."

The story, so fondly researched by us over the years, collecting tracks and anecdotes, is told as we would want, with music and jokes to counter the hard struggles to 'make it'. But the mind of a collector/researcher is never satisfied and questions abound to distract us from the action.....When Bob Crewe says...."bring me four tracks and then I'll record you, but in the meantime,

you'll sing backup for me." We think, 'What were those tracks?'

How much did Bob Crewe really contribute, after all he was their producer and wrote many of the lyrics?

Does the singing and arrangements in the show really capture the 'sound' from the original group?

And then there are the songs out of sequence with the correct timeline and used to enhance dramatic effect. This could be viewed as 'sacrilege' to



**Ray and Jean Jox 2004**

purist fans from the 60's and 70's. It could easily become a case of being cynical and rejecting this contrived compilation of their catalogue. But that would be wrong and would do an injustice to the writers. Those questions are pushed to the back of your mind as the drama unfolds. To quote Mike Denton again:-

"So how do you take a story that everybody already knows how it ends, a story that is (upon reflection) merely

one overused American Entertainment Cliché right after another, and turn it into the most exciting hour of musical theatre this side of Act One of Michael Bennett's Dreamgirls? Know-how, my friend; know-how, and chemistry, and love. Without all three ingredients, we get formulaic junk (or just ill-crafted junk; which is worse?), the kind of stuff that gives Broadway a very bad name. With all three, you get combustion, you get goose-bump-inducing excitement, you

get the stuff that memories are made of: the happy miracle that makes Broadway the world's showplace bar none. As a great Broadway lyricist once wrote, ungrammatically, you either got it or you ain't. Jersey Boys has got it."

The play and its pace destroy anyone who could hold a cynical and questioning stand-point, because you are entranced from the opening lines.

Whether a fan or not the story carries you away and the electrifying performances by young people who see the energy and spirit of the 60's in the music bring it to life in a way that is different than the original performances but which is no less enthralling or harmonic.

The show was simply stunning. The story was funny, happy, sad and dark with the individual members each telling their part in that very effective spring, summer, autumn, and winter format. By admitting to the links with the mob, and prison spells for some of the group members we might be forgiven for complaining about the clean cut image portrayed in the 60's articles which still regularly appear in the UK Newsletters. In contrast the rows and turmoil were explored in the show, as was the break up, with tax and mob debts forcing Valli to "work till he is 90"

Articles from those days 'papered over' this history to maintain the clean cut image as opposed to the imperfections of the Brit groups 'bad boy' images which have in pop folk-lore become an attraction. Icons of Rock aren't created by such a clean-cut image. It's boring!! That this story never got out is testament to their secretive public persona and their



**Frankie Valli in 'The Sopranos'**

roots. I suppose I was surprised that so much that doesn't endear anyone to the group was admitted too. As characters with good and bad they told it 'warts and all'. But this honesty brings something that makes us feel empathy with them. It was hard, and we all understand that. In understanding that, we recognize the good and bad in everyone, especially when, above all, the music shines through and gives the story such heart. It is easy to agree with Michael Denton's words:

"I love the shrewd, clever, big-hearted book—a fable, to be sure, but one sanctioned by all the living participants—a book that eschews traditional so-called integration for a much more workable formula of pop songs as pop songs, supplementing and illustrating what's happening in the story but never attempting foolishly to tell the story on their own."

And what of our long researched producer of much of this music, Bob Crewe. Described as..." Peter Gregus plays Bob Crewe, the Four Seasons' producer and guiding spirit, with enormous panache and good humor." Bob is captured more as a 'gay diva' rather than a key part of their music and a driving force in their success. This is perhaps one of the plays few weaknesses, but perhaps an understandable one. If portrayed correctly it seems likely Bob Crewe would have matched the roles of the individual Seasons and this would probably have damaged the play structure and storyline. The stars of the play had to be the Four Seasons. Bob Crewe was, we believe from our research, tall, thin, fair-haired and a great deal more flamboyant and caustic than the character in the play. We know that Bob is not 100% happy with his portrayal in the play but like us he is happy with the plays success. Maybe his memoirs will correct the historic contribution he made and allow this portrayal to be excused?

The climax of the show at the Rock n'Roll Hall of Fame Awards was ecstatic and left the audience in sheer delight. In show review terms it is well described in Michael Denton's summary:-

"So, here's the bottom line: Jersey Boys is the Broadway musical we've all been waiting for—a bona fide crowd-pleasing hit with nary a drop of cynical commercialism, a show that's dazzling, entertaining fun but never



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makes you feel like you're being pummeled into submission in the process; a show that's easy to love because it's full of love. We don't get a gift like this every day, or even every season. So cherish it. And don't miss it!" But to those of us who have been appreciative of the music for so long this is not the bottom line. It's not like watching a 'live' performance by the group. They always feature only the odd highlight. This show is constant fun, happiness and intensity. No quiet bits or boring introductions of the group. It is non stop action and music. This play seems to draw together so many disparate parts of the group's career and inevitably changes your perspective of them. Maybe we understand their troubles and the conditioning this created; maybe we respect them a little bit more...as Nick Massi's character says ...."you sell 100m records and see how you han-

dle it". The real bottom line is this play has changed history's perception of the Four Seasons and their music. The implications for them and the portrayal of their contribution to 60's music folk-lore cannot be exaggerated. The perception of their music has changed for all-time. Our perception and appreciation of it has also changed. And this has occurred almost over-night. Only time will show just what place and recognition will ultimately be achieved. I don't think Bob and Frankie realize what they have unleashed and it is doubtful they are ready for it. Suddenly there is credibility! I don't think we, the long-time suffering fans also realize what this will mean....but, although we may not be ready for it we are 'gonna roll with it' because we caught the spirit in the music before everyone else. Now we are the disciples.