

## **Beautiful: The Carole King Musical @ The Muny**

Songs by Carole King, Gerry Goffin, Cynthia Weil, and Barry Mann

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It's Muny Time! America's largest and longest-standing outdoor musical theater begins its 105th season in Forest Park. The first show of the season is the St. Louis premiere of *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, fresh off of its smashing run on Broadway. This is a very fascinating show for the Muny because not only are they examining the life and work of an incredible artist, but they are also examining the evolution of popular music from the 1950s to the 70s – two journeys that are inextricably intertwined with each other.

Carole King is a legendary singer-songwriter who I've never really gotten into, which is a shame because it turns out that she did so much more than her successful solo career. King cut her teeth in 1958 (*at the age of 16!*) as a songwriter for Manhattan record producer Don Kirschner, while simultaneously attending Queens College as an education major. *Talk about a prodigy!* In college, she befriends chemistry major Gerry Goffin, who just so happens to be an aspiring writer. They soon become songwriting partners, and then become romantic partners just as quickly, marrying each other when Carole was 17 and Gerry was 20. During their tenure in Kirschner's Brill Building, they form a strong friendship with songwriting duo Cynthia Weil and Barry Mann, all of whom develop a professional rivalry as they each strive to be the duo that changes the game in the pop music industry.

Carole King, Gerry Goffin, Cynthia Weil, and Barry Mann all created songs that would become pop standards: "Some Kind of Wonderful," "Will You Love Me Tomorrow," "On Broadway," "The Locomotion," "You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling," and so much more. However, during the course of their careers, Gerry's bipolar disorder combined with his drug use causes his mental health to rapidly decline. His frequent emotional breakdowns and extramarital affairs drive a wedge between him and Carole. It was during this increasingly difficult time that Carole broke through to a brand new sound – the one that she pioneered with her first solo album, 1971's *Tapestry*, the album that launched her career right up into the stratosphere.

*Beautiful* was a very educational experience for me. Seeing it made me realize how criminal it was that I never got into Carole King. I didn't know that she did so much to contribute to the evolution of pop music, writing songs that expressed universal human emotions in ways that no other songwriter was doing in her generation. Carole King's music is original, diverse, loving, joyful, dignified, and beautiful (*see what I did there?*) – hers are songs that will stand the test of time, solo or otherwise. Her story is told on the Muny stage wonderfully thanks to the energy and thoughtfulness of director Marcia Milgrom Dodge, choreographer Patricia Wilcox, and musical director Charlie Alterman.

*Beautiful* is carried on the shoulders of Sara Sheperd as Carole King. Sheperd doesn't just do a great impression of King's unique voice; Sheperd fully embodies King's resilience, drive, and great sense of humor. Steven Good's intense performance as Gerry Goffin is one of the most realistic portrayals of bipolar disorder I've seen in any form of media. Jackie Burns as Cynthia Weil and Jarrod Spector as Barry Mann are a fantastic comedy duo with really great romantic chemistry – they provide a dramatically satisfying contrast to the failure of Carole and Gerry's marriage. Noah Weisberg as Don Kirschner radiates the energy of the boss who can insult you to your face and love him for it; and Sharon Hunter as Carole's mother Genie is the perfect balance of overbearing and supportive. The production's ensemble also does an incredible job of recreating the original performances of the songs, evocating such popular acts as the Drifters, the Shirelles, the Righteous Brothers, the Beatles, and many more.

*Beautiful* is performed against a versatile unit set by Ryan Douglass consisting of a skeletal version of the Brill Building in Times Square, with scene transitions effectively done in concert with Kylee Loera's video design. Tracy Christensen had the monumental task of designing costumes that span three totally different decades, and achieves that task with stunning detail. Rounding out the production values are Rob Denton's lights, J. Jared Janas's hair and makeup, and John Shivers and David Patridge's sound.

*Beautiful* is a wonderful tribute to an amazing artist who wrote really catchy, really thoughtful, really heartfelt songs, and the Muny matched that energy perfectly with their staging. *Beautiful* is yet another banging season opener for the Muny.