

Theater in Delaware: Singers chase the blues full-throttle

Perfectly paced musical celebrates 'race records' label

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THEATER REVIEW

WHAT: "Chasin' Dem Blues" by Kevin Ramsey

WHEN: Through May 1. Wednesday through Saturday at 8 p.m. Matinees Wednesday, Saturday, Sunday at 2 p.m.

WHERE: Delaware Theatre Company, 200 Water St., Wilmington.

TICKETS: \$35 to \$49 (\$15, children and full-time students). Additional discounts for seniors and groups. With purchase of regular-priced ticket 30 minutes before the performance, teenagers can receive free admission.

INFORMATION: 594-1100 or www.delawaretheatre.org.

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Doug Eskew belts out a song in "Chasin' Dem Blues" at the Delaware Theatre Company. Eskew is a vocal near-double for the late Solomon Burke.
COURTESY OF MATT URBAN

"Blues is the roots, everything else is the fruits." So proclaimed Willie Dixon, blues composer, famed recording-session maestro, bass man, and an early bridge between the blues and rock 'n' roll.

Dixon's assertion is validated, indeed celebrated, in Kevin Ramsey's foot-stomping, hard-working, perfectly paced musical "Chasin' Dem Blues," now raising the roof at the Delaware Theatre Company.

Writer-director-choreographer Ramsey's 34 well-selected tunes, from gospel to the "Devil's music," saturate 15 distinct times and/or places in this vivid and vivacious encapsulated history of the blues and many of its now-celebrated pioneers.

Four phenomenal actors and musicians go full-throttle as they portray a pantheon of (mostly black and Southern) blues musicians and the white executives and workers at the Wisconsin furniture maker where one-fourth of America's "race records" were made.

Along with its fluid musical and staging transitions, "Chasin'" has the powerful Doug Eskew, a vocal near-double for R&B's recently deceased Solomon Burke, and the equally powerful Jannie Jones, reminding us that the blues is "so real it's almost fiction."

Also portraying several characters are guitarist Eric Noden and pianist Nate Buccieri. Mike DeCastro is on drums.

With all that it offers, this East Coast premiere needs more verbal guidance, at the outset, showing us where it's going.

The musical is subtitled the "untold story of Paramount Records." However, it all-too-briefly recounts how, during the remarkable period between 1929 to 1932, more than 1,600 songs -- mostly the blues -- were recorded in the famous, makeshift 1803 South Green Bay Road "three-takes" recording studio. This musical enclave was housed on the high-ceilinged second floor of the furniture factory in the all-white east Wisconsin river village of Grafton.

The music of more than 60 black artists was embedded in the burlap and cardboard-covered brick walls of that magical though dimly lit space smelling of rotgut cigars and whiskey.

Eskew and Jones are probably among the best beltors in musical theater. Amplifying them with head microphones is both unnecessary and an assault on the ears.

A glorious irony: Even with all their infamous imperfections, Paramount Records' mostly discarded or longtime unwanted "race music" platters now fetch the price of a very fine car. And that, honey-bunny, ain't no blues.