

## **DOWNTOWN CABARET THEATRE MOLDS SCOTT KEETON'S *THE MAN IN BLACK* INTO A STAGE PRODUCTION**

Broadway to Vegas – Laura Deni

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Scott Keeton has performed across the country for over 20 years with his roadhouse blues band as well as touring with Eric Idol and Bo Diddley. He currently stars in the Johnny Cash tribute show *The Man In Black* at the Downtown Cabaret Theatre in Bridgeport, CT. A distant relative of the one of the most influential musicians of the 20th century, the Oklahoma City born and raised Keeton spoke with Broadway To Vegas about developing this production, and what it's been like to work with some of the most influential names in show business.

"I went on the first tour he did," recalled the guitar player/singer about Eric Idol. "He had done a tour years and years ago with the full Python, but in 2000 he decided to go out on tour. It was called Eric Idol Exploits the Songs of Monty Python. I had done some production work and it turns out that their production company came out of Oklahoma City. They were doing the sound so they hired me. I started out as the guitar tech and did the monitors."

Almost immediately Idol put Keeton on stage as part of the band.

"Then I did a couple more tours with him where I was the only guitar player with him and John Du Prez. He is an absolutely wonderful man," said Keeton about Idol. "I think the last time I was in Las Vegas was with him in 2003 at the House of Blues. He was writing *Spamalot*. It was funny because he said the people with *Camelot* were trying to sue him."

*Monty Python's Spamalot* with a book and lyrics by Eric Idle, music by John Du Prez and Eric Idle, directed by Mike Nichols, the 2005 Tony Award winner for Best Musical, ended its reign at Broadway's Shubert Theatre Jan. 11, 2009. The production had a successful run in Las Vegas ([See Broadway To Vegas column of April 1, 2007](#)) and is on a North American tour with performances at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles July 7-Sept. 6.

"Eric is such a *nice* genuine person," emphasized Keeton. "He is always incredibly gracious to everyone around him."

Then there was Bo Diddley.

"He was on tour and picked up a band in each city. He sent a promoter to find a band who knew his stuff. In '96 or '97 my band was hired. It turned out that we were really good at it, so the job branched out to regional, rather than just local. He would call us anytime he was coming to the Midwest. If we weren't working, we took off and worked with Bo Diddley."

"He was *amazing*. If there was a Mt. Rushmore of rock 'n' roll he would be on it," stressed Keeton about the man known as The Originator, because of his key role in the transition from blues music to rock & roll, influencing a host of legendary acts including Buddy Holly, Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton.

Oklahoma has bred a lot of performers - Kristin Chenoweth, Will Rogers Reba McEntire Garth Brooks, Elvin Bishop, Hoyt Axton, Vince Gill, Woody Guthrie, Wanda Jackson, Toby Keith, Roger Miller, Patti Page, Kay Starr, Hank Thompson, Carrie Underwood, Jimmy Webb, Bryan White, Blake Edwards, Lon Chaney, Jr., James Garner, Van Heflin, Ron Howard, Rue McClanahan, Brad Pitt, Chuck Norris, Vera Miles, Tony Randall, Dan Rowan, Ted Shackelford, Alfre Woodard, Bill Moyers - to name drop only a few. Still, for Keeton his career path sometimes surprises him.

"Talk about surreal - it isn't exactly that being from Oklahoma makes it any more surreal than anywhere else - but one day I'm playing a club in Oklahoma City and the next day I'm working with Eric Idol at Carnegie Hall and Art Garfunkle walks on to sing a cameo. Then I'm working with Bo Diddley who calls me one of his sons, and the other ones are Eric Clapton and Keith Richards. Sometimes it seems a little weird. It's really nice. It makes you feel good. Not only that, but it validates so many things. What you've been trying to become good at - Yeah, you *are* good at. And, you're good enough to do it with the guy who basically helped to invent this thing."

As for *The Man In Black*, "I never had plans for this show. It took on its own life."

That on stage birth was made possible by the proliferation of the Cash clan.

Johnny Cash had believed in his younger days that he was mainly Irish and partially Native American - having been erroneously informed that he was one-quarter Cherokee. Actually, Johnny Cash was of Scottish royal descent but he learned this only after a chance meeting with former Falkland laird, Major Michael Crichton-Stuart. The singer then traced the Cash family tree to 11th century Fife, Scotland.

It was also as an adult that Scott Keeton, 41, learned about his own roots which branched into Johnny Cash.

"You don't think about your relatives growing up - they are just people. Then later on, when they unfortunately start passing away, my aunt started doing our genealogy and that all starts coming out," explained Keeton.

Connecting tree branches are William Cash and Francis "Fanny" Cash.

"When they disbanded the clans in Scotland, William Cash came to America in 1653," said Keeton. Francis "Fanny" Cash is my great, great, great grandmother. She would be Johnny Cash's distant cousin. The line comes from William Cash. Johnny Cash's grandfather Moses Reuben Cash would be a cousin to Fanny Cash. My uncle Sidney Lee was Professor of Drama at a Community College in New York," he said referring to Sidney G. Lee, Professor Emeritus (Theatre & Dance) at Nassau Community College. "His mother was my great grandmother. Her mother was Margaret Hagen and her mother was Francis "Fanny" Cash.

Once a Johnny Cash link was in place opportunists descended, resulting in Keeton being on guard against people who have dollar signs in their eyes for all the wrong reasons.

"Promoters wanted me to do a complete imitation. 'Hi, I'm Johnny Cash' and then everything else. I refused. There was no way I was going to do that. This is something that is very important to me, *his* music. I didn't think that anyone who was really a fan of Mr. Cash would appreciate that," he said referring to a pure impersonation.

*The Man In Black* which utilizes 33 Johnny Cash songs, details the history of the music, and pays astute attention to the era in which Johnny lived and performed. The changes in America as a result of the time, and his influence on people as he grew as a performer through the decades.

The production includes vocalist Rhonda Ingle, drummer James Keys, Mike Myers on Bass and David Short playing the Pedal Steel/Violin.

"No one from the Johnny Cash estate has complained and they are aware of it," stated Keeton. "Bob Wootton his guitar player has come to see the show. He was real nice," said Keeton about Wootton who spent over 30 years playing guitar for Cash. "We've opened for Mel Tillis and Jerry Lee Lewis, who both new him."

"This is a tribute to the *music* - his music," he reiterated. "Basically, this is a really

good band which does this music really well, and just happen to have some other affiliations to that man and his family."

"I did one or two shows and they were in 1500 seat casino show rooms. We sold out. I came out and it was a joke, but it's become a tag line. I said - Hello, I'm *not* Johnny Cash and everybody laughed. I said - Look there is only one Johnny Cash. We're here to celebrate and sing his music. To honor and remember him and have some fun. It was packed and people went nuts."

"I'd been so worried about people thinking I was pandering and no pun intended but, cashing in on Cash. I'm not pretending to be something else. Clearly there has to be some sort of similarity - you have to sound like him or nobody would want to hear it."

Keeton used his educational background to help him come to terms with his performance. He's a former University of Oklahoma student who graduated from Southern Nazarene University in Oklahoma City. "Then I got my Masters in Counseling Psychology from there - to do music therapy. I think that training helped give me the empathy to look at the crowd and get over my own insecurities, when I saw that the audiences were genuinely affected by the experience. I don't mean that we did it. I mean that we are just the conduit to give the audiences the opportunity to re-experience this music in a focused way."

Cash, known as The Man In Black, wasn't always dark monochromatic. In an era when country singers were garbed in rhinestone suits and fancy cowboy boots, Cash couldn't afford costume designer Nudie Cohn who was known for designing rhinestone-covered suits and other elaborate outfits, worn by celebrities such as the \$10,000 gold lame' suit Elvis Presley wore on his *50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong* album cover, Hank William's white cowboy suit featuring musical notations on the sleeves and 52 suits for Porter Wagoner, each costing between \$11,000 to \$18,000.

Cash and his band had initially worn black shirts because that was the only matching color they had among their various outfits. He wore other colors on stage early in his career, but he claimed that, political reasons aside, he simply liked black as his on-stage color.

"I wear black, but I don't start off wearing black, because he didn't always wear black either," said Keeton about his stage show. "Another reason he started wearing black, as I understand it, is because it was just easier to hide the wrinkles. The black shirts he wore you could fold up and they were easier to carry. Then later on, it became a symbol."

"Up here at the DCT, it's the first time I've ever had a dresser, which is great!"

The Downtown Cabaret Theatre has an impressive list of services. The staff include Wardrobe Supervisor Jimmy Johansmeyer and Steve Swatt who is the House Manager/Master Carpenter.

The DCT, as it is known, employs an average of 45 of which 10 are full-time staff members, who rely on the Theatre for their livelihood. Drawing upon both Connecticut and New York talent, the Downtown Cabaret has proven to be a marvelous opportunity for theatre professionals to showcase their talents and it has created a favorable environment for both the veteran and up-and-coming artist.

Offering a year-round season of productions, at the moment, this unique theatre recovers about 75% of its costs through box office revenues. This is an extraordinarily high percentage compared to other non-profit theaters.

Richard C. Hallinan has been the Theatre's Executive Producer since 1981. His productions have included popular Broadway musicals as well as the American premiere of *Blood Brothers* in 1988 and a production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* in 1979 - before it appeared on Broadway.

Seeing potential in *The Man in Black*, the DCT has put its own stamp on the production. For the first time *The Man in Black* is multimedia.

"We did probably 60 shows and then a promoter had us come up here to the DCT. Their production team put together a multimedia show with three screens and just incredible lights, so it's become something really way more visually entertaining. This is our debut as a multimedia production. There is video and stills and they have smoke, moving lights and a really neat train opening. I saw it for the first time when we went into rehearsals. We've been in rehearsals all last week," he said of the show which opened last night and runs for two weeks.

The show may be taking on a life of its own, but Keeton gives credit to Todd Grove, Director of Operators of EPGGroup, for creating momentum.

"He's a touring company manager, promoter, comedian. He worked on *The Simpsons*. I worked with him on the first Eric Idol tour and I've known him for a very long time. He worked on *Rob Becker's Defending the Caveman*, which is the longest running one man Broadway show of all time. I put the idea in his head that we should do some shows because he's more knowledgeable in this kind of thing."

"We did a 10-city run of sold out shows. But it was just rock 'n' roll lights and us singing the songs. Then they had the idea of doing it like this. I thought we were doing a damn good job. But, if I were in the audience this would add a lot to it," exclaimed Keeton who voiced amazement at what the DCT has accomplished in transforming his show into a production.

While most performers depend upon the selling of show merchandise Keeton has the opposite approach. "I don't sell any recordings of the show. I want people to go to the store and buy *Johnny Cash* records." For the time being that stance may be the proper, prudent one. In the future, as *The Man in Black* develops, audiences might want *both* a recording of the show as well as Johnny Cash CDs.