

Review

Charles McNulty
Entertainment & Arts

‘American Idol’ winner Nick Fradiani channels the gruff brilliance of Neil Diamond in ‘A Beautiful Noise’



“A Beautiful Noise,” which opened Wednesday at the Hollywood Pantages Theatre, exists to celebrate the rough magic of Neil Diamond’s catalog. (Jeremy Daniel)



By Charles McNulty
Theater Critic | [Follow](#)

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“A Beautiful Noise” is a jukebox musical that understands the assignment.

The show, which opened Wednesday at the Hollywood Pantages Theatre on the Broadway musical's North American tour, exists to celebrate the rough magic of Neil Diamond's catalog. If glorious singing of American pop gold is what you're looking for, "A Beautiful Noise" delivers.

Diamond's fans will no doubt feel remunerated by the thrilling vocal performance of Nick Fradiani, the 2015 winner of "American Idol," who plays the young iteration of the double-cast Neil, the Brooklyn-born pop sensation who went on a rocket ship to fame and fortune that gave him everything in the world but the peace that had always eluded him. Fradiani vocally captures not just the driving excitement of Diamond's singing but the note of masculine melancholy that gives the songs their grainy, ruminative subtext.



Hannah Jewel Kohn and Nick Fradiani play Marcia Murphey and the young version of the double-cast Neil Diamond, respectively. (Jeremy Daniel)

Jukebox musicals, inspired perhaps by the commercial success of “Mamma Mia!,” tend to muscle an artist’s hits into flagrantly incongruous dramatic contexts. Anthony McCarten, the book writer of “A Beautiful Noise,” avoids this trap by setting up a framework that deepens our appreciation of Diamond’s music by shining a biographical light on how the songs came into existence.

The older version of , now the grizzled Diamond burnt out by tour life and desperate not to duplicate the mistakes he made in his first two marriages, is played by Robert Westenberg. He’s been sent by his third wife to a psychotherapist to work on himself. As he shares with the doctor (Lisa Reneé Pitts), he’s been told that he’s hard to live with — an accusation that his long, stubborn silences in the session make instantly credible.

Introspection is as unnatural to Neil as it was for Tony Soprano, but the doctor gently guides Neil past his resistance. Intrigued by his remark that he put everything he had to say into his music, she presents him with a volume of his collected lyrics and asks him to talk her through one of his songs.



Nick Fradiani, from left, Robert Westenberg and Lisa Reneé Pitts as both iterations of Neil and his doctor during an onstage therapy session. (Jeremy Daniel)

“I Am ... I Said,” which makes reference to a frog that dreamed of being a king before becoming one, cuts too close to the bone. That single will have to wait for a breakthrough in therapy, but he is lured back into his past when the Jewish boy from Flatbush talked his way into a meeting with Ellie Greenwich (Kate A. Mulligan), the famed songwriter and producer, who convinced him not to change his name and gave him the chance that set him down the road to stardom.

The production, directed by Michael Mayer and choreographed by Steven Hoggett, marks this therapy milestone by having backup singers and chorus members emerge from behind Neil’s chair. Out of darkness, musical euphoria shines through.

The show’s approach is largely chronological. “I’m A Believer,” which became a runaway hit for the Monkees, catapults Diamond into the big leagues. Once he starts singing his

own material, he becomes a bona fide rock star — a moody Elvis who straddles rock, country, folk and pop with a hangdog bravura.

Neil's first marriage to Jaye Posner (a touching Tiffany Tatreau) is an early casualty after he falls in love with Marcia Murphey (Hannah Jewel Kohn, spinning a seductive spell musically and dramatically). It's Marcia who coaches him into playing the part of front man. The hits come fast and furious after that, but the frenzy of tour life exacts a severe toll.



Tiffany Tatreau as Diamond's first wife Jaye Posner, from center left, Nick Fradiani and Kate A. Mulligan as singer-producer Ellie Greenwich in "A Beautiful Noise." (Jeremy Daniel)

Of course, everyone at the Pantages is waiting impatiently for "Sweet Caroline," the anthem that never fails to transform into a sing-along after the first "bum-bum-bum." The performance of this ecstatic number is powerfully mood-elevating.

Fradiani's character work is most impressive in his singing. That's when the inner trouble Neil has been evading since his Brooklyn childhood hauntingly resounds.

"America," "A Beautiful Noise," "Song Sung Blue," "Love on the Rocks" and "You Don't Bring Me Flowers," songs heard countless times, take on more weight as the circumstances of their creation are revealed. The therapy gets a little heavy-handed in the protracted final stretch. But Westenberg, who's a touch too emphatic early on, lends poignancy to the cathartic release that ushers Neil into a new place of self-understanding.

By keeping the focus where it should be — on the music — "A Beautiful Noise" thrives where more ambitious jukebox musicals stumble. This is a show for fans. But as the son of one who remembers the songs from family road trips, even though I have none of them in my music library, I was grooving to the sound of a bygone America, high on its own unlimited possibilities.

At the curtain call at Wednesday's opening, Katie Diamond came on stage and video-called her husband as the Pantages audience collectively joined in an encore of "Sweet Caroline." It wasn't easy to hear Diamond sing, but it hardly mattered. Fradiani had supplied that dopamine rush for more than two hours with his virtuoso musical portrayal.

'The Neil Diamond Musical: A Beautiful Noise'

Where: Hollywood Pantages Theatre, 6233
Hollywood Blvd., L.A.

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays, 8 p.m.
Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 1 and 6:30
p.m. Sundays. Ends July 27.

Tickets: Start at \$57. (Subject to change.)

Contact: BroadwayInHollywood.com or
Ticketmaster.com

Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes

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Charles McNulty is the theater critic of the Los Angeles Times. He received his doctorate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism from the Yale School of Drama.