

# Theater Review (LA): Louis and Keely Live at The Sahara

Part of: StageMage

The best show in Los Angeles at the moment is Louis and Keely Live at the Sahara, currently playing at the Matrix Theatre in Hollywood. Following a sold-out run at the Sacred Fools Theatre, they have moved this smash show to the Matrix through November.

The show concerns the “wildest act in Vegas,” which featured the wild antics of Louis Prima and the stony-faced song stylings of Keely Smith. The pair started as a side attraction and eventually moved to the main room at the Sahara, where they played multiple sets night after night from 11 PM to 6 AM between 1948 and 1961.

Unless you are a “boomer” you may not know who they were - though you may have caught Keely singing “That Ole Black Magic” with Kid Rock earlier this year at the Grammys. Prima and Smith were as famous for their bickering as for their singing. The bickering eventually turned real, and Prima’s philandering and lack of dedication to family caused Keely to leave. Prima went on to try his luck at animation voices for Hanna Barbara, and was most notably the voice of the orangutan King Louie in Disney’s Jungle Book. He died of a brain hemorrhage in 1978.

The show was written by its two stars, Vanessa Claire Smith and Jake Broder. Vanessa captures Keely perfectly, from the deadpan look to the smooth singing. I finally discovered that Keely Smith’s blank expression was part of the act and not her personality. It would be interesting to know what the real Keely would think of the portrayal, but so far she hasn’t shown up. Perhaps it’s too painful.

Jake Broder, too handsome to look like Prima, still does an amazing job recreating his performance. He is all tics, fingers, and feet, but always in rhythm. His performance is a real triumph. I knew Jake when he played Mozart on Broadway with David Suchet. Little did I know then that besides a similar wildness in the two characters, Broder was also such a damn fine musician.

Speaking of musicians, the band assembled for this show plays some mean jazz. Dennis Kaye is the musical director and plays the tenor and baritone sax. Colin Kupka plays the tenor sax as well and does some really hot solos. Richard Levinson plays piano, Jeff Markgrag strums the bass, Brian Wallis wails on the trombone, Michael L. Soloman is the drummer, and Paul Litterai plays the jazz trumpet. They’re a great band, and they act too!

**The director, Jeremy Aldridge, he keeps the place jumping.** My only caveat about this great evening is that the extent of Louis and Keely's fame is not covered. They were regulars on Ed Sullivan (where I saw them, being too young and far away for Vegas), and Keely starred in a couple of movies.

If you want to hear some of their hits, like "Embraceable You," "Pennies from Heaven," "Sheik of Araby," and "That Old Black Magic," head for the Matrix for some of the old Vegas until November 30.