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Ballads with a new flair: Lettermen promise more than typical 'oldies' show

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
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Does sitting outside listening to music with the one you love on a warm summer evening fill your heart with romance?

Do songs like "Theme from 'A Summer Place,'" "Goin' Out of My Head/Can't Take My Eyes Off You," and "The Way You Look Tonight" conjure up cherished memories of

the past?

If so, then you may want to take that special someone in your life to experience the silky and romantic sounds of the Lettermen — Tony Butala, Donovan Tea and Mark Preston — who'll perform in concert Saturday night at Foellinger Outdoor Theatre.

The Lettermen were formed in late 1950s as a vocal group comprising three strong soloists who could also work together as a group. They've had a remarkable career highlighted by five Grammy nominations, several hit singles and 32 consecutive albums that have made the Billboard Top 100 albums chart.

While the Lettermen's success is noteworthy, Tony Butala, founding member and lead singer on most of their hits, stresses that fans who go to see them perform will not see a typical "oldies" act but something he feels is a little more current.

"What they're not going to see is three old, pot-bellied, balding, crew-cutted guys in letter sweaters singing music," Butala said in a telephone interview. "They're going to see a 2010 entertainment package that just happens to have had hit records in the '60s and '70s.

"Every Lettermen hit record, beautiful ballad, I look at as a really delightful sweet piece of German chocolate cake," he said. "So you can't take too many in a row. What I've done is I've condensed all of the hit records into medleys. I do about maybe a chorus and a verse of each one of them. I get 26 of them out of the way in about 15 minutes, which leaves us with another two hours to really entertain the people."

Butala's career began years before he joined the Lettermen. He learned his craft working with some of the giants of the entertainment industry who were popular long before the rock era.

"When I was a choir boy in the Mitchell Boys Choir, I worked with Bing Crosby in a movie he made in 1954 with Rosemary Clooney, Vera Ellen and Danny Kaye called 'White Christmas,'" Butala said. "So I've been singing professionally all my life in show business. I did a lot of voiceovers, a lot of motion pictures, a lot of commercials and things, so I was not new to it when the Lettermen started having hits.

"We (the Lettermen) toured with Jack Benny, George Burns and Red Skelton and overseas with Bob Hope," Butala added. "Listening to stories backstage of Jack Benny and George Burns, talking about their vaudeville days in New York. It was just a ... magical experience."

Throughout the years of rock, disco, punk and rap, the Lettermen have catered to an audience of adult fans who have welcomed them into their lives. Whether it be making movies, recording or performing live, Butala is most grateful to be able to do it all and do it for an appreciative audience.

"I prefer to do it all," he said. "What I do prefer is, and what I really feel flattered and very humbled by, is the fact that, for 50 years, the general public out there has let me and the Lettermen be a part of their lives. They've included us when they trim their Christmas trees with our Christmas albums, they include us in their anniversary parties when they play our love ballads, or people have used our songs when they've gotten engaged ... all that is ... flattering and ... I'm very touched by that.

"I'm living a wonderful life. I've been very well blessed, and, you know, I really can't complain about anything. I've got to really be thankful."



More Information

Silky sounds

What: The Lettermen in concert

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Foellinger Outdoor Theatre, 3400 block of Sherman Boulevard in Franke Park

Cost: \$15. For more information, call 427-6000 or go to www.fortwayneparks.org.

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To hear audio excerpts of James Grant's interview with Tony Butala, go to www.news-sentinel.com and click the link in the "Online Specials" box on the home page or Entertainment page.