



LARRY LELLI **MILLION-DOLLAR DRUMMER**

ON DECEMBER 4, 1956, FOUR YOUNG MUSICIANS convened at Sun Studios in Memphis, TN for a photo op and impromptu jam. The recordings would languish unreleased for decades, but the one-time collaboration between Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Carl Perkins—dubbed “The Million Dollar Quartet”—turned into a rock and roll legend.

Now the legend has returned to life via a Tony-nominated musical, *Million Dollar Quartet*. With four young actor/musicians portraying the rockabilly stars and a live band onstage, the production blends Broadway showmanship with the spontaneous energy of a rock and roll jam. And at New York City’s Nederlander Theater, the driving force behind the music is drummer Larry Lelli.

Lelli is a Broadway veteran who has performed in hit productions such as *The Producers* and *Pal Joey*. But he’s never experienced anything like *Million Dollar Quartet*. “First of all,” he says, “the band is right there on stage, not down in the pit. And I play an actual character: W.S. “Fluke” Holland, the drummer who was there that day in 1956.”



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The show's biggest departure from typical Broadway practice is the fact that the music isn't reproduced note-for-note each night. "Each performance is a total, live jam session," says Lelli. "We never play it the same way twice. There's never been a Broadway show like this, where the show is the band. We feel so lucky to be there!"

For Lelli, a self-described musical chameleon, the gig feels perfectly natural. "Rockabilly includes so many styles: gospel music, bluegrass, the beginnings of rock and roll. I grew up in Wisconsin, playing and absorbing everything I heard around me, from rock to swing to country to polka. So in a funny way, stepping into this role was like stepping into an old, comfortable pair of shoes."

After earning a jazz performance degree from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Lelli relocated to Nashville, where he played country sessions and toured with Doug Stone. "At one point," Larry remembers, "I jammed with a bassist who was playing a Broadway show, and he said, 'You'd be really good on Broadway. You're a schooled musician. You can read, work with conductors, and play percussion as well as drum set. If you ever get tired of Nashville, check out New York.' So I started making trips up here and realized I liked the energy, and the level of musicianship in the pit bands was so high. So in 1996 I just moved up here cold."

Lelli isn't *Million Dollar Quartet's* only Nashville connection. "Our music supervisor is Chuck Mead, who was one of the leaders of the alt-country group BR-549. I was living in Nashville when they came on the scene. I used to go down to the little honky-tonk where they played when they were first getting together, and I remember thinking, 'Wow, these guys are the real deal. They're playing bona fide rockabilly.' He's the perfect guy to oversee this show, because he lives and breathes that music."

For the stage production, Larry obtained a shiny new Yamaha Tour Custom kit, which the show's property department proceeded to make less shiny and new.

"The kit has a custom marine pearl wrap, which the prop department buffed so it would look like it had been dragged around in a car trunk for a long time. They also took some of the shine off the chrome. But underneath the specialized texture, it's just a regular Yamaha kit."

And the sound? "Just amazing," says Lelli. "The first time I brought these drums to the theater, everyone was just blown away. They sound so huge, warm, round, and full. The sound guys love them. They were the perfect choice for the show. You know, I've been a proud Yamaha artist since 1992. Not only does Yamaha make the best drums and percussion instruments, but they have the best people working for them."

The authentic musical energy of the *Million Dollar Quartet* has earned the production the sort of fandom more associated with bands than Broadway shows. "Audiences feel the magic and intensity, and they return over and over," says Lelli.

But there's one audience member whose praise was particularly meaningful for Larry. "Fluke Holland came up for opening night," he says. "He gave us his blessing and paid us the highest possible compliment when he said, 'You guys nailed it, head on. The only problem is, it's too good!'"

