



LEILA NAWIDI / LAS VEGAS SUN

Human Nature, a former Australian boy band, performs its version of Motown — with dance-oriented beats and lavish harmonies — at the Imperial Palace.

REVIEW

If Motown had been Vegas ...

By Joe Brown, Las Vegas Sun

Everybody, it has been said, is crazy about a sharp-dressed man.

Watch out for a lot more crazy people on the Strip: With “Swingers” styling — four changes of jackets and skinny ties — the vocal group Human Nature has arrived and is ready to give the “Jersey Boys” a run for the title of our town’s most dapper dressers.

It seems to be a friendly rivalry: Most of the “Jersey Boys” gang, in fact, trooped down the street to cheer on the new kids on the block Wednesday, Human Nature’s official opening night at the Imperial Palace.

“Gday, Las Vegas!” chirps the cute, clean-cut quartet — Human Nature is, like the Wiggles, an Australian import, a former-boy band that was huge in its homeland in the late ’90s, with five chart-topping albums and tours with Celine Dion and Michael Jackson.

Having become a bit long in the tooth for tween and teen fans, they’ve undergone an ingenious bit of reinvention, making over and marketing (mostly) Motown hits to a new audience on a new continent.

This, of course, is the nightmare at the heart of “Dreamgirls,” the co-opting of black pop music, homogenized and commercialized by white performers. But this toothsome foursome has the imprimatur of Smokey Robinson, who was present at the birth of Motown, and is presenting the show, which somewhat mitigates the potentially disturbing whitewashing. And it may prove to be a royalties bonanza for Vegas resident Robinson and his contemporaries if Human Nature catches on in the U.S. and Motown hits start to sell all over again.

This is not a tribute act, not an imitation or impersonation: Human Nature’s approach to these well-loved songs is affectionate and respectful, but the upbeat take on Motown is not “authentic.” This is roccoco Motown, with

IF YOU GO

What: Human Nature
When: 8 p.m. Saturday through Thursday
Where: Imperial Palace Showroom
Admission: \$49.95-\$59.95; (888) 777-7664, imperial-palace.com
Running time: About 90 minutes
Audience advisory: Singalongs and table dancing. Keep your drink close if you are seated in the front rows

See a slideshow of Human Nature performing at lasvegassun.com/ae

a noticeable dance-oriented update in the beats, and lavish harmonies, as if Brian Wilson had arranged vocals for the Temptations and Supremes, with Phil Spector supplying grandiose production.

And Human Nature remains a boy band at the core — the vocals retain some of that blandly yearning teen idol tone, leaving out some of the darker notes and moods in these songs. That said, the members could have a hit single tomorrow with their gritty, propulsive cover of Edwin Starr’s “Twenty Five Miles.”

They are in constant motion onstage, and they seem to have studied the original Motown moves, incorporating the Four Tops’ locomotive step on “Reach Out, I’ll Be There” and the Jackson Five’s distinctive arm motions in “ABC,” adding an aerobic jolt to these already intricate spins, turns and sidesteps, shoulder-pumping, hand claps and neck snaps.

Who among us hasn’t secretly pretended to be a Motown backup singer? One of the show’s sweetest moments is when the guys walk the eeger crowd through the iconic motions of the Supremes’ “Top! In the Name of Love.”

At one point they bring up the question: “Who’s your favorite Human?” But unlike the Fab Four (or even N Sync), these fellows aren’t

really that remarkably distinct from each other, resembling chipper frat boys or junior execs:

There’s Andrew, the lead singer, who resembles a young, skinny Sinatra. His helium coo floats skyward on “Oh Baby Baby,” and it’s not an overstatement to compare him favorably with Smokey himself. His brother Mike handles the Michael Jackson parts on “ABC” (which also could be a hit again). Phil adds a necessary bit of grit, and anchoring it all is Toby, the bass man, built like a rugger.

Winking and grinning and making eye contact, the guys flirt manfully with the audience, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that they were going to start stripping at any moment. And sure enough, they stepped out onto the tables at the front, and started slowly peeling off their natty blazers.

“Toby,” Andrew chided, “we’re not ‘Thunder From Down Under.’”

But that’s as racy as it gets in this show, which is absolutely family-friendly and should appeal across generations and nationalities. (It was imported by Harrah’s President Don Marandino, the man who brought Donny & Marie to the Strip.) This show looks and sounds sensational, with dramatic lighting effects, cute video intervals during costume changes, and the six-man Funk Foundation band providing a walloping drum-and-bass foundation. And it’s well paced, too, building to a literally floor-shaking finale. Just when I started to tire of the slickness and perfection, they took it down to just four guys singing “People Get Ready” around one microphone, beneath a blue spotlight.

Who doesn’t like Motown music? And in this ingratiating presentation it seems near impossible *not* to like Human Nature. Snaazzy, snappy (and just a little bit sappy), it’s everything you’d want in a Vegas show.

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