

arts & culture

The Lettermen Keep Harmony Alive Around the Globe

The classic trio returns to The Villages for two shows at 4 and 7 p.m. March 29 at Savannah Center.

By TAYLOR STRICKLAND
Daily Sun Senior Writer

Donovan Tea has been to The Villages too many times to count now, but he's always pleased to see the community on The Lettermen's tour schedule.

"(Villagers) are a great cross section of people," Tea said. "They've seen us quite a few times, which means we can't rest on our laurels, so we bring our best every time."

The Lettermen are an internationally acclaimed vocal trio known for their seamless harmonies and romantic ballads. Founded in 1959, the group has had several lineups of singers, with the current lineup consisting of Donovan Tea, Bobby Poynton and Rob Gulack. Tea is one of the most tenured members in Lettermen history, second only to original lead singer Tony Butala, and after nearly 38 years with the group, he doesn't plan on stopping any time soon. "I love what I do," Tea said. "Most people my age are retiring and they ask me when I'm going to give it up and I tell them, 'I want to die with one more show on the books.'"

Born in Houston, Tea grew up listening to his mother's Lettermen and Frank Sinatra albums. His mother, Fran, whom Tea likens vocally to Dinah Shore, always sang, and his father had a recording contract that fizzled out.

Despite growing up in a musical family, Tea didn't always aspire to be a singer.

"I wanted to be a professional golfer, but I wasn't good enough," he said.

Tea got his first singing job at 15, after his family moved to Pasadena, California. A representative from Hinshaw's asked him to sing during a store fashion show.

"It was at the Diamond Bar Country Club, and I sang in front of about 500 well-coiffed ladies," Tea said. "I sang three songs to open the fashion show and got paid about \$15, which was all the money in the world back then."

It was during this performance, Tea said, that the show biz bug bit him. From then on, he devoted much of his time to performing. Thankfully, he had people to guide him.

At the behest of a beloved high school teacher, Tea joined the Roger Wagner Los Angeles Master Chorale, competed in and won a singing competition in Guildford, England, and toured throughout Europe. He then went on to join The Young Americans, which he describes as "like going to college to be a singer in show business."

"I learned from the best," Tea said. "I got a lot of encouragement from the people we were opening for."

According to Tea, the best advice he ever received came from Ray Charles, who told him not to get into show business if there was anything else he could do. Tea said it was both a gift and a curse that he wasn't good at anything else.

"It really was the finger of God," Tea said. "There are people better than me and



1960's era vocal group The Lettermen, lead by Tony Butala, center, with Donovan Tea, left, and Bobby Poynton, perform their song "Hurt So Bad" in front of a sold-out crowd at Savannah Recreation Center in 2018. They will return to The Villages for two shows at 4 and 7 p.m. March 29 at Savannah Center.

Daily Sun file photo

certainly better looking than me that didn't make it — I feel blessed every day that I got to do this."

Tea was asked to sing with The Lettermen in 1984 after they discovered him singing at the Dunes hotel in Las Vegas. After a brief test run with the group, he officially became a full-time Letterman and has been one ever since.

The Lettermen are best known for songs like "Portrait of My Love," "Goin' Out of My

Head/Can't Take My Eyes Off You," "Put Your Head on My Shoulder" and many others. However, audiences can expect more than just the old standards during a Lettermen concert. Tea said the group is good at staying relevant, often taking newer songs and "Lettermenizing" them.

"It keeps us current, and it keeps our show fresh" Tea said. "I've been pleasantly surprised by the great

response to these newer songs — people have been telling us to keep them coming."

The Lettermen return to The Villages for two shows at 4 and 7 p.m. March 29 at Savannah Center. Tickets

start at \$25. Go to thevillagesentertainment.com.

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