



If the tale of one's life story is a biography, what do you call it if it's done musically? An autobiomusigraphical ! A medium whose time has clearly come. First, there was Stew's story, *Passing Strange*. Distilled from Stew's youth in L. A., developed on the workshop level, then repertory, then Off- and on to On-Broadway, it captured the Tony for Best Book -- not to mention the Drama Desk award for Outstanding Musical, Music, and Lyrics. Then followed Lin-Manuel Miranda who penned an early draft of *In the Heights* (set in the 'hood of his youth in Manhattan) while he was a sophomore in college, then nursed it and rehearsed it onto Off-Broadway for a season before copping Broadway's Best Musical Tony of 2008. And now, on the autobiomusigraphical horizon, appears Port Chester's Chris Cassone.

*The Cakeman Chronicles* is a similar ethnic autobiographical yarn that just unfolds and unfolds. Or better, a tapestry, which the author skillfully weaves from the threads of his unique beginnings in Port Chester, N. Y. Interwoven throughout is the Grandfather thread. Early on, Cassone plants the mystery-seed of Grandpa's end, letting it grow by song, picture (the production features excellent accompanying projections), and narrative. Many in the Westchester area will recognize Chris' family bakery from the ubiquitous "J.J. Cassone's Italian Bread," which he artfully turns into a character in the story. The sound-track includes songs that are effectively performed by the author -- solo, sometimes with a live on-stage band, sometimes before a pre-recorded video backdrop, and sometimes coordinated with an excellently produced pre-recorded track -- not surprising since Cassone was a much sought-after recording engineer in a prior life. Some tracks are produced by Rob Sabino; one includes Larry Chance and the Earls ("Remember Then"); one is by LA's Grayson Wray Project. The live songs, engagingly and enjoyably performed by their creator, seamlessly both comment on the story, personify, and advance it. One, "Grandma's Lament (Goodbye)," brings members of the audience to its feet.

Then there's the Cakeman's cake. Or cakes. Music lovers, and investors in the City of Port Chester, which, besides being locally famous as the fragrant manger of Life Savers®, (Pep-O-Mint, Cherry, Wintergreen, etc.), profitably, and culturally, turned an old palatial vaudville/moviehouse, *The Capitol Theater*, with its domed ceiling and sidewall arches, into a fabulous Fillmore-in-the-suburbs, back in the Golden Era of Live Music. And, like Miss Miller, Cassone actually wangles his way into the history of this fabulous music palace of the sixties/seventies--with photographic evidence that he presents--to befriend the likes of *The Greatful Dead*, Santana, and Janis Joplin. This done with the unlikeliest of ruses -- but you would hate me if I disclosed the fantastic plot. All I can say is that the denouement is worthy of Wilde, and the music is up there with *Passing Strange* or *In the Heights*.

The performance at the Whippoorwill Hall in Armonk began with a cocktail and an appetizer. Alan Goodman fascinated with virtuoso, original, and compelling nylon-string guitar artistry, which, in spite of his offspring's indifference, left the house begging for more. The thoughtful appetizer was *Mondays at 8:00*, a sensitive and immensely immediate one-act experience (written by the Axial Theater's Linda Guiliano) which teaches that everyone is someone from whom we can and should learn.

It's easy to see *The Cakeman Chronicles* growing from local, Italian-American soil, fed by its share of blood and crust, to become a mighty oak--like African-American *Passing Strange*, or the Latino *In the Heights*. If this delightful autobiographicalmusical experience is accessible in you neighborhood, drop everything and go. If Chris Cassone keeps weaving this tapestry, it will grow in size and relevance from local, to metropolitan, to universal -- dare I say it -- to Broadway. (Maybe - film?) Let's hope. We'll be able to say we knew him, when all you had to do was show up with a cake and a convincing rap.

- Fred Schminke, October 23, 2008