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Cabaret Is Where You Go for Tenderness



by **Andrea Marcovici**

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I once read a letter from a woman confessing that she could no longer afford to go to cabaret performances. Instead, she said, she clipped the reviews out of the paper to read about what was sung. She liked to best when there was a photograph because “sometimes I hold them up to my ear, and I can almost hear the music.”

What inspires this sort of passion? A field of endeavor that is described, alternately as in the verge of extinction, having a renaissance or actually dead. Cabaret is an art form, if you’ll excuse the expression, to which I am hopelessly devoted. Beginning tomorrow night and running through next Sunday, hundreds of performers from all over the country who share my passion will converge on Town Hall for the Fifth Cabaret Convention. They will give of their hearts and voices to thousands of people who will pay a mere \$10 a ticket.

To start with, I think the term cabaret deserves defining, for it seems to mean something different to everyone you ask. Cabaret singing has its roots in the chansons of Paris at the turn of the century, in the dark political satire of Berlin in the 20’s and in the mellow, smoky nightclubs of New York in the 50’s. But I believe it’s become something quite distinct in the 90’s.

It has come to mean an intensely personal evening of song and stories, delivered in a simple, honest way, in an intimate space that shatters the “fourth wall,” a term actors use to describe what’s beyond the footlights. Part stand-up comic, part balladeer, part evangelist, today’s performer often has a theme that unifies the evening (either the work of a single composer, an era like World War II or a genre like theater) and a strong dramatic sense of beginning, middle and end. They also tend to know a great deal about the

music they're singing, be it classics from the American popular song book, obscure treasures or new songwriters just starting out; they are generous enough to share that information in witty and inventive ways.

But the real art of the cabaret performer lies in the juxtaposition of songs, putting two or three songs together in such a way that new and deeper meanings come to light, the resonance of one song lingering to change the color of the next. At its best, cabaret can amuse, entertain, and inform, and when a performer like Michael Marotta chooses to put "My Ship" and "The Folks Who Live on the Hill" together, it can dazzle you, catch you unawares and make you weep. It is not television. The audience participates in a direct, emotional conversation with the artist and leaves feeling contacted and personally touched.

I have a theory that when President Lyndon Johnson pulled up his shirt to show the American public his surgical scar, it was the end of civilization as we knew it. It's been pretty much downhill since then. One of the most important things about cabaret in the world it conjures up. It is a world of elegance, grace and sophistication—cocktails and conversation, fox trots and Fred Astaire, of Dorothy Parker and the perfect retort. But the world we're stuck with today is so overproduced. Broadway's gone bombastic; movies are all special effects and car chases; pop music is mostly braassy belt or rhythm and anger.

Where to go for tenderness, a clever turn of phrase, a moving melody? Cabaret. As my friend and colleague David Staller says, it's the natural descendant of storytelling around the fire. And the stories told around the candles at the Algonquin or the Russian Tea Room or Eighty Eight's in the Village were written by some of the greatest creative minds of the 20th century: Hammerstein and Kern, Rodgers and Hart, Ira and George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Johnny Mercer—the list is endless.

To my mind, the single most important function of the cabaret singer is to preserve the legacy all Americans are heir to—the popular songs of the past. These songs and the stories of how they were written are the treasures we leave to our children. And not just the standards, but the delightful, quirky oddball numbers that were never bona fide hits. Many of the songs written for Broadway since the early 1900's would be completely unknown today without cabaret performers and their penchant for collecting. The songs that were cut when a show was on the road or never recorded for the cast album—these are the surprise "finds" in any singer's repertory.

Going to cabaret can be like a treasure when you head a great "new" song by Harold Arlen or Alan Jay Lerner that you never knew existed. As these works are being rescued from obscurity, the classics are often returned to their former glory; just see Phillip Officer or Weslia Whitfield peel back layers of stylistic gloss and sing a song as it was originally written, and you'll know the importance of cabaret. Paradoxically, it is one of the few outlets for today's new lyricists and composers. We don't live in an age when more than 200 new shows are produced on Broadway each season, as in the 20's. Radio play lists are shockingly narrow, emotionally powerful lyrics with tuneful melodies that can't be classified as "pop," they share little hope of ever being heard. But Craig Carnelia has Karen Akers, Michele Brouman has Michael Feinstein, Francesca Blumenthal as K.T. Sullivan, John Bucchino has Amanda McBroom, Tom Toce and David Israel have me, and the new song has a place in the hearts of audiences because of cabaret. After all, the legendary Mabel Mercer introduced Alec Wilder and Bart Howard when they were just young pups.

I can't say it's an easy life. Few of us support ourselves from singing alone. There are panicked trips to the throat doctor, walking strange hotel corridors in the middle of the night, with nothing but a bunch of roses for company. Why do it? "The thrill of working without a net," said Mr. Staller. The actor-singer Clay Crosby feels that music allows him to reach places emotionally that he can rarely do with text alone. Karen Akers told me: "I don't quite know why I feel so compelled to be honest among strangers. I just love singing for people."

There's the joy of working with your accompanist, a musician talented enough to stand on his own, yet willing to play the supporting role to bring your vision to life. The complete freedom in choosing your own material, writing your own play, as it were. It's the most fully realized form of expression the singer can have, and it challenges the full range of your creativity. When it's successful, it's your success, not the director's or the editor's.

Of course, it's vulnerable and often painful to be out on a limb like that. Sometimes you'll find yourself soulfully seeking communion with an audience member at the exact moment that he's looking at his watch. Or taking a little nap. But it's worth it when you see someone reach across the table to hold a lover's hand, wipe away a tear, or burst out with surprised laughter.

I do it for all these reasons and for one more: the look on the faces of older people, those of my parent's generation, the ones who went through World War II. With popular culture and the media catering to every whim of Generation X, these people often feel invisible, not spoken to. But when I sing my evening of Irving Berlin or my World War II show, I sometimes receive the extraordinary gratification of having someone stop me in the lobby and say: "Thank you, you sang my youth." And every now and then, because young people are coming to cabarets in increasing numbers, you see a 20-year-old and an 80-year-old, side by side, enjoying the same song. Few musical forms can boast that.

In the movie "Love Among the Ruins," Sir Laurence Olivier describes himself to Katherine Hepburn as a "hopeless romantic." When asked to define the term, he replies rather sadly, "A man who dines alone in a restaurant where there's music." To me, the reason the cabaret tradition will always endure lies in this one fact: the cabaret is safe haven for the hopelessly romantic. In the rose glow of Gershwin and Kern, in the candlelight and in the bubbles of champagne, true love is not an oxymoron. It's possible. The complex emotions and tender melodies of the love songs that comprise the heart of a cabaret singer's repertory give us hope—to find romance that never was, to rekindle romance that's lying quiet, to shed our fears and try again. Love is not dead. Cabaret is not dead.

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