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Singer makes connection with classic songs that have heart:

By JOHN WIRT - jwirt@theadvocate.com - Entertainment writer

Ned Fasullo's business card gets to the point: "Big Band Entertainment -- Swinging the Standards." Fasullo is something contemporary, often tuneless singers are not -- a crooner. Whether singing with piano accompaniment in a local Italian restaurant or swinging out with a 16-piece big band, Fasullo croons classic pop songs identified with such mid-20th century singing stars as Dean Martin, Tony Bennett, Bobby Darin and, most of all, Frank Sinatra. Besides being a crooner, Fasullo has something else in common with the singers mentioned above -- he's Italian. The music of Sinatra and his peers, Fasullo said, "it's something that I've always listened to in an Italian family. So I just kind of got hooked on it over the years."



The American pop standards that comprised Sinatra and others' repertoire, Fasullo added, are just about the only music he listens to. He listens for enjoyment as well as to study the many interpretations of the songs he performs. Fasullo has another good reason for preferring standards over modern pop, hip-hop and country -- the human touch.

"What's here today is good for today, but this is music that was written note by note, by arrangers. Quincy Jones arranged a lot of the tunes that we do in the orchestra. He was Frank Sinatra's arranger for six years. Back then, if you needed to change a horn part in a song, you had to rewrite the whole part. It was all in pen and ink. Now we have computers. Nowadays people would rather push a button and have the computer make all the music, and use just a couple of musicians.

"And a lot of singers nowadays don't sing. They're filling in notes around a piece of synthesized music. Some of these pop singers are really good, but you can tell that there wouldn't be much to others without the production and the effects."

Even if the music Fasullo performs gets little radio play, he's not alone in his appreciation of standards like "Fly Me to the Moon," "It Had to Be You," "Mack the Knife" and "Cheek to Cheek." Rocker Rod Stewart's recent standards album is a hit. Barry Manilow, Neil Diamond, Barbra Streisand and Boyz n the City recorded albums of standards in recent years, too.

"It's never gonna go out of style," Fasullo said, "because it's classy music that can fit almost any occasion." Popular demand, Fasullo said, inspired him to make a commitment to singing, at least to the extent that his day job with a computer software company allows.

"When we started it was kind of a hobby," he said. "But everywhere that people saw us they begged to know where we were gonna be next. They asked if we had CDs. Nobody was really doing this." Fasullo got serious about singing in late 1999. He sang with a big band for the first time in July 2000, performing at the Centroplex with veteran local band-leader Buddy Boudreaux. "It was fabulous," Fasullo recalled.

Fasullo found singing work at Italian restaurants such as Maggio's, Cippriani's, DeAngelo's Pizzeria Company and Gino's Restaurant and Jazz Club. He currently performs Thursdays at Vincent's Italian Cuisine with pianist Brigham Hall and vocalist Mary Beth Broussard. Hall, Fasullo said, "he's the key to all of it. I've been with him longer than anybody. We don't even communicate when we play because he knows exactly what to do." Fasullo also performs at many wedding receptions, a natural setting for his style of music.



"A lot of weddings are going back to traditional big band music," he said. "In May we have a wedding reception every weekend and on one Saturday we have two receptions." A self-taught singer, Fasullo learned his trade by studying the approximately 1,400 recordings he has by Sinatra, Vic Damone, Al Martino and others.

"Sinatra's my all-time favorite. My second favorite's probably Bobby Darin. I've been compared to him, and I like a lot of the arrangements that he used. A lot of times there could be a song like 'Just In Time' that several of those guys recorded, but the one that I like the most is Bobby Darin's version."

Fasullo is going to Los Angeles soon for a visit during which he'll sing at a jazz club in Hollywood. Though it's just an informal opportunity -- a favor from a friend of his California-residing aunt -- who knows who may be listening? This could be the start of something big. Meanwhile, Fasullo has no interest in singing anything but the great American songbook.

"I don't perform rock or pop. I don't feel that."