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Cabaret Advocate Opens 'Sketchbook' To Boost Singing Career

by Daniel Gewertz

With unflagging spirit, Will McMillan has played the role of cheerleader for Boston's struggling cabaret scene. But tomorrow he has another job: star.

McMillan, who directs the *Cabaret Connection* concert series at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education, will make his Scullers debut tomorrow night. The singer is celebrating the release of his first CD, a stylish saunter through the Great American Songbook, modestly titled *Sketchbook 1*.

"All the way along, I've had two urges: be a performer, but also to be involved with the business," McMillan said. "I love schmoozing, making contacts, planting seeds of ideas and helping our local cabaret scene. My style is about including other people."

Selling the scene might also assist his own singing career. "To quote a friend, if the water rises, all the boats rise with it," he said.

Sketchbook 1 is a subtle take on 20th century American pop composers, from Porter and Kern to the Gershwins. The sole backing is by Steve Sweeting, whose spare, witty piano style is influenced by Thelonius Monk.

The inclusion of one Beatles song, "Cry Baby Cry" on McMillan's latest disc is a remnant from a totally different chapter in the 37-year-old's life.

For several years he was a rocker. "First I was in *Cue*, an electronic band. Our idols were *XTC* and Peter Gabriel. We performed with a wall of keyboards," he said. After a stint in a folk duo, *Jon & Will*, McMillan sang with *Adult Children of Heterosexuals*. "There were singers, horns, strippers, fire-eaters — a big, outrageous spectacle," he said.

Though he loved that band's theatricality, McMillan has been paring down his approach ever since. He also was with *Q-Set*, a small band that performed songs written by or associated with gays and lesbians.

The low-key, part-time quality of McMillan's musical life is a result of his childhood. From an early age, McMillan was a professional model and an actor in commercials.

"I was one of New York's jingle regulars," he said. "I was a very successful little puppet — a people-pleaser with great memorization skills." McMillan calls that era "my childhood as a part-time commodity. It left me, as an adult, very reluctant to go the show-biz path." He thought about a law career, but at Harvard the only activity he truly enjoyed was singing in a close harmony group, *The Din and Tonics*.

Quitting Harvard, he spent the next 15 years at "a series of part-time jobs to support my musical habit."

Though a songwriter, McMillan's performance will be largely classic pop. "The craft that went into those songs is jaw-dropping. Not only is there a genuine emotional message, they also rhyme in an uncontrived way, and the vowels are in the right places to sing well. They almost sing themselves."

You can hear Will and Steve tomorrow night, Wednesday, February 9, 2000 at Scullers Jazz Club, 400 Soldier's Field Road at 8:00pm. Tickets are \$10, and are available by calling (617) 562-4111, or thru Ticketmaster at (617/508) 931-2000.

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