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On The Rise — Cabaret Promoter Grows Into Performer

by David Wildman

For the last four years, one of the most ardent members of the Boston cabaret scene has been Will McMillan, who has tirelessly promoted the intimate piano-voice stylings of many a performer as director of the *Cabaret Connection* at the Blacksmith House in Harvard Square.

Now, McMillan is stepping into the spotlight himself.

"I used to sing in pop-rock bands and there is a Dionysian, wild, sexual energy that goes along with that kind of music," he says. "But it also can be a pushing -people-way kind of energy, where you have to wear earplugs because it is so loud. After a while, I wanted to do music that you could sort of lean into, music that was gentler and didn't damage people's hearing."

McMillan, 37, originally came to Boston to attend Harvard University, after growing up in New York as a minor child star, making commercials, appearing in soap operas, and performing in television pilots with well-known actors such as Barbara Feldon and Fred Gwynne.

At Harvard, he directed some plays and starred in a theatrical revue of songs by David Bowie before dropping out and joining up with the local rock band *Cue*. Eventually, he tired of the rock

scene and began collaborating with pianist Steve Sweeting, whose starkly dissonant chording provided an interesting contrast to McMillan's warm voice.

Together, they wrote new songs and playfully deconstructed chestnuts like “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” and “The Way You Look Tonight.”

At that point, McMillan heard that the Cambridge Center for Adult Education was planning to start booking cabaret acts. Rather than asking to be considered as a performer there, he volunteered to help them.

“I just wanted to hear people singing the Great American Songbook,” he says. “Then they hired me to help with the series, and I went from that to handling the publicity and then booking it. Now it's my baby, for better or for worse.”

Gradually McMillan began to emerge again as a performer. Still working with Sweeting, he performed a show at CCAE in May 1997, and formed a duo with singer Lillian Rozin for a series of whimsical performances called *The Will and Lil Show*.

In 1999, he organized a series of his own solo shows and was one of 37 performers chosen nationally to be a fellow at the O'Neill Theater Center's 10th Symposium in Waterford, CT.

“I found that I am good at schmoozing,” he says. “I met a lot of people that are writing new music. I hope to bring up people from New York where the cabaret scene is really vital and to cross-pollinate them with writers and singers from Boston.”

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