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An intimate sound: Hearing cabaret's growing appeal

By Sarah Rodman

Psst! Hey you, want to go to the cabaret? If you do, you're part of a growing number of people in the Hub discovering the joys of a little night music. Now is an excellent time for that discovery, because March is cabaret month, highlighted by this weekend's Boston Cabaret Festival. Although the month may be coming to a close, the numbers of performers and performances has risen in recent years and options remain. In any given week, fans of this fizzy and fun style of performance have a half dozen shows to choose from throughout Greater Boston.

What is this thing called cabaret?

"First of all people think of the movie *Cabaret*, which is partially right, because cabaret started in Paris and then moved over and expanded in Berlin," says vocalist Will McMillan, local repository of all cabaret knowledge. "Then a certain segment of people, who maybe spend too much time late at night on the Internet, think that cabaret means triple XXX, as in a euphemism for pole dancing or lap dancing."

Members of the local music community are doing their best to dispel misconceptions and wilkommen as many new listeners as possible with this weekend's festival in Cambridge and Lexington. Everyone in the close-knit local scene seems to agree on two key ingredients in the cabaret cocktail: an intimate venue and a singer who can make an emotional connection with the audience through storytelling, music, humor and heart.

"To me it's good singing and good songs," says singer Jan Peters, who has hosted a cabaret open mike night at the Encore Lounge in Boston's Tremont Hotel for three years. "It's a very intimate concert where you're going to be entertained, you're going to know something about the performer when you leave, you're going to be touched, you're going to laugh. It's like a good short story."

Sophia Bilides, producer of this weekend's festival, says, "One minute you're laughing at the wit of one of the songs and the next minute you're touched by the wisdom."

What constitutes the cabaret repertoire? Though the Great American Songbook — a catchall term referring to everything from Gershwin to Sondheim — is in regular rotation, it is certainly not the only well from which singers draw.

"The music doesn't necessarily have to be show tunes or standards," says Brian De Lorenzo, president of the Boston Association of Cabaret Artists. "There are some great songwriters nowadays who are writing for cabaret singers, and a lot of cabaret singers here and in New York sing blues and rhythm and blues and folk songs, too. And even country, because a lot of country songs are about heartbreak and falling in love."

McMillan cites his own concert favorites: folk and rock singers such as Joni Mitchell and Peter Dinklage and local songwriters such as Barbara Baig and Krisanthi Pappas.

Venues such as Scullers in Brighton, the Regattabar in Cambridge and Club Cafe in the South End — which all host cabaret performances — conjure up the classic image of the smoky cabaret. But like churchgoers without a house of worship, cabaret musicians make music wherever they can.

Bobbi Carrey has become something of a star on the public library circuit, winning over fans among the stacks in Newton, Brookline, Boston and Brighton as well as at her regular nightclub gigs. "Also, universities are great," says Carrey, a former Fidelity vice president and now a full-time singer.

How long has this been going on?

Cabaret began just before the turn of the century in France, expanding famously during the Weimar era in Germany, as portrayed in the Bob Fosse film *Cabaret* and then spreading worldwide. In Boston, the scene has "ebbed and flowed" through the years, says McMillan, who remembers a flurry of activity in the late '80s and early '90s at Club Cafe.

In 1995, the Boston Association of Cabaret Artists, which grew out of informal living room meetings held by local singers, established itself as a place "to support those people who are producing cabaret," says De Lorenzo. Its 150 members include performers, producers and fans, making it the go-to group for performers seeking accompanists, chart transposers, collaborators or booking advice.

New York and San Francisco have dedicated cabaret rooms, but in the Hub, performers generally have to rent out the performance spaces and produce and promote their shows themselves. Rumors have swirled in recent months that a dedicated space will be opening soon, but Bilides says, "I'll believe it when I see it."

Could a space promoting only cabaret shows thrive in the crowded Boston entertainment market? Maybe not. De Lorenzo points out that even in New York, a cabaret mecca, the rooms double as bars and restaurants. "Cabaret generally doesn't make money for

everybody involved. It's best to have a club that has other things going on."

Though a dedicated club may be a pipe dream, the audience is growing. Dayla Arabella Santurri has witnessed that growth as general manager of Scullers Jazz Club. "In the last couple of years it's been really tremendous. What's happened in the last six months, especially, is that I'm starting to see Scullers' (jazz) regulars cross over to cabaret shows. It's not an overwhelming wave, but it's starting to happen," she says.

The performers themselves also believe the numbers are getting larger, borne out by the growing number of performances. "People are producing more shows, and I don't think they would be if there weren't people to bring to them because it's a major financial investment in yourself," says Peters, who works in the offices of Bread and Circus by day.

The audience swell is attributed to a number of factors. First, there is the grassroots organizing and out-of-the-box venue play, what McMillan calls WHAM, "winning hearts and minds." Pop and rock artists performing standards, as recent Grammy winner Norah Jones does, and such movies as *Chicago* also help, they say. Current popular entertainment and events also may play a role.

"I think that there is a trend going back to the really beautiful simplicity of that kind of entertaining," says Peters. "I know for me some of the music that is out there is such a turnoff, a lot of stuff on television is such a turnoff, and I think people are going back to the basics, and cabaret is such a basic, honest human form of entertaining."

Boston's talent pool is crowded with quality vocalists. So crowded, in fact, that Bilides had trouble choosing just 10 singers for her gala concert event tomorrow night at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington. "I could've easily doubled the (number)," says Bilides, who also oversees the association's Web site. "My original motivation was that it would be great to pull this together for one night and to celebrate what we have here," says Bilides of last year's sold-out event. "We've all doing our individual shows, but I thought that the community had grown to the extent that it deserved to be spotlighted in a larger context."

For anyone who might think cabaret audiences are filled only with well-heeled sophisticates and stereotypically swishy, Judy Garland-loving gay men, think again. McMillan often sees a 30-something mom and her cabaret-loving 10-year-old daughter in the front row at his shows. Bilides gives thanks for all the "young faces" she sees at her performances because it reassures her that these songs, which she calls "an American treasure," will get passed down.

McMillan, a former rocker, advises music fans to keep an open mind. "The way in for the straight guys," he says, "is for them to realize that whoever they're dating would probably love the experience."

So, if life is a cabaret and this is cabaret in Boston, then clearly life is good.

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