

# The Boston Globe

June 4, 2006

## **This Next Song's By Steve...And the next. And the next.**

*Cabaret — from a Sondheim to a Foster (inspired by a Fischer)*

by Joel Brown

Like the cabaret songs he loves, Will McMillan makes a pleasant, well-mannered first impression. Keep listening, though, and you'll find edges and shadows in both.

His duet show with Bobbi Carrey, *If I Loved You*, celebrated moon-June-spoon romance without ever forgetting the complications and heartaches love can bring. Their most recent effort, *In Good Company*, twice drew a crowd to Scullers while asking tough questions about need and greed in the age of Enron.

On Wednesday, McMillan, 44, returns to Scullers with *Will Loves Steve*, a solo show that's more personal and pointed than anything else he's done in a decade as a staple of the Boston cabaret scene.

The set list features the songs of Stephen Sondheim, Stevie Wonder, Stephen Foster, et al. Sure, it's a gimmick. But the title also refers to McMillan's bond with his partner of 14 years, Stephen Fischer, with whom he shares a condo in Arlington.

"It would be hard to put together a one-to-one correlation of exactly how I've helped Stephen and how he's helped me, but I wouldn't be who I am 14 years later without him," McMillan said. "And so the whole show is a reflection of who I am through his good influences."

No coincidence that *Will Loves Steve* hits the stage during Boston Pride festival. "I guess there is a kind of stand-up-and-be-counted -- in a very small way -- energy that is behind the show, that is different than doing a show of Gershwin songs or something that would be a little bit tamer," McMillan said.

Sitting in a coffee shop off Brattle Street in Cambridge, McMillan is boyish, thoughtful, and unerringly polite, despite battling a cold. He insists the political aspect of the new show was something that he realized, more than planned. But he has come to relish the idea that his title answers the anti-gay slogan,

'God didn't create Adam and Steve, God created Adam and Eve.'

"I am definitely doing this to say I exist and this is my life, and my life is actually very loving and respectful," McMillan said, his voice rising for the first time in a long conversation. "And for the people in this state and out of this state who would look at my life and want to completely curtail it . . . the show is a way of saying, yes, people like me do exist, and we're going to stand up and share a little bit about our lives just to affirm that message."

Frequent collaborator Carrey said McMillan sees music as connected to the whole of his life. The thought struck her as he sang a verse during "In Good Company" about the small actions we take rippling across the global economy.

"Most people I know have some kind of world view, but I'm not sure in their daily lives they're actually connected to it or live by it," she said. "Will predominantly walks or bikes or takes the T everywhere. He doesn't tend to drive. He's someone who doesn't have a cell phone. And that's not coincidental. That's part of his world view. He does that better or at least more fully than a lot of people."

Several of the Steves whose songs McMillan will sing are gay, he notes, and their music embraces the contradictions of the heart.

"There's this big energy struggle going on right now between people who think life is black-and-white and people who think life is complicated and ambiguous," he explained. "And this [show] is kind of a big musical affirmation that life is complicated and ambiguous -- and loving."

He was still mulling how much of this topic would make its way into his between-songs patter, not wanting the politics to overshadow the music. McMillan was just as happy talking about the connections between him and the composer-Steves.

These range from an exchange of letters with the great Sondheim -- "He left a message on my phone that I still have a copy of somewhere" -- to collaborations with songwriters Steve Sweeting and Steve Schalchlin.

As a boy in Washington D.C. and New York, McMillan sang onstage and acted in commercials and TV movies. He was a standby in the original company of Stephen Schwartz's *Pippin* but never got onstage.

"Now I'm going to sing a song from *Pippin* that I always wanted to sing when I was in the fifth grade and never got to," he said.

Once at a cabaret conference, he went out to dinner with Schwartz and mutual

friends. Schwartz "seemed a little uncomfortable that this balding middle-aged guy was the original stand-by for Theo 25 years ago, but he was cordial," McMillan said with a laugh.

While *Will Loves Steve* is a showcase for McMillan's honeyed tenor, it's also a collaboration with pianist Doug Hammer and Michael Callahan on clarinet, saxophones, and flute. They rehearse at Hammer's Lynn studio, with McMillan taking home the results on his laptop so he can experiment with the run order and segues.

He expects the show to contain 20 songs, from an initial list of about 50. Most are Broadway or traditional cabaret tunes, but the list includes four by Wonder, "one of the most sublime Stevies of all."

Wild card: Browsing the Internet for material, McMillan learned that Cat Stevens, now known as Yusuf Islam, was born Steven Georgiou. So "Wild World" is likely to be in the show, in a reggae-tinged version.

By day, McMillan is the assistant director and development director of the Cambridge Center for Adult Education. He is, he notes with a smile, good at PR and writing thank-you notes. It's been quite a while since he performed at the raucous club Jacques and sang in rock bands and the ensemble known as *Adult Children of Heterosexuals*. But he seems to be coming around to the idea of making some noise again, in a different way.

"If one goes back to the real historical roots of cabaret in Paris and Berlin, it was very, very contemporary and political," he said. "They were questioning gender roles and homosexuality and all sorts of stuff back then. Cabaret now has kind of a softer edge to it... Maybe this show allows me to tap more into that original spirit of cabaret."

"I still read the papers compulsively, religiously, and there's still so much going on in our own country that is frightening and maddening and depressing," he added. "And literally on a daily basis, music lifts me out of whatever scared, angry, stuck place I may be in — I don't even know how to describe the emotions — but the ones that feel like we're going to hell in a handbasket. And music somehow shifts me over to a different place, where there is love, there is hope, there is connectedness."

McMillan debuts *Will Loves Steve* at Scullers Jazz Club, Double Tree Guest Suites Hotel, 400 Soldiers Field Road, Boston, on Wednesday, June 7 at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$18, or \$16 for BACA members, and can be purchased by calling 617-562-4111.