

EDGE MEDIA NETWORK

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Singing Duo In Perfect Harmony At Scullers

By John Amodeo

The art of cabaret performing is best known as a solo art, where a gowned chanteuse or tuxedoed crooner stands at a mic offering delectable musical tidbits for our delight. What is less familiar are the many cabaret partnerships that exist, not only across the country, but here in the Boston area, such as longtime duo, Will McMillan & Bobbi Carrey.

Celebrating ten years together, McMillan and Carrey will honor other successful partnerships, often those of songwriters such as Rodgers & Hammerstein, Lerner & Loewe, Mercer & well just about everyone, in their new show, *In Perfect Harmony*, this Thursday, November 14 at Scullers Jazz Club in Boston.

Successful cabaret artists in their own right, they each have numerous solo shows, and solo cabaret recordings under their belt.

Over a decade ago, Carrey, formerly a senior VP at Fidelity Investments, left the creatively unfulfilling corporate world to pursue her dream as a cabaret singer. Since then, she has performed at numerous venues, including repeat appearances at Scullers Jazz Club, and has been invited to perform in CabaretFest! in Newburyport and Provincetown.

In 2002, she released her solo recording, "Between the Wars: Music from 1918-1941," celebrating the Great American Songbook's focus on the patriotism, poignancy, and passion associated with that era. Howard Weiner of WOMR FM radio said: "Bobbi Carrey doesn't just sing the songs; she lives them."

McMillan has been a household word in the Boston Cabaret community, known not only as a performer, but as a tireless advocate of the cabaret art form. As a

performer, he has performed at numerous venues, including Scullers Jazz Club, creating varied and distinct shows covering the work of the American Songbook songwriters as well as contemporary songwriters with equal aplomb.

He has been a Fellow of the O'Neill Theater Center's 10th Cabaret Symposium, and the Cabaret Conference at Yale. As a child performer, he appeared in numerous commercials, made-for-TV movies with Barbara Feldon and Fred Gwynne, and was even a standby in the original Broadway production of *Pippin*.

Always a collaborator, he has partnered before, with Lillian Rozin in *The Will & Lil Show*, and with as part of the quartet *At The Movies*, which won a 2003 IRNE for Best Cabaret Group Performance.

His recordings include *Will Sings Sondheim*, and *Reel One* with *At The Movies*. Aiden Fitzgerald of the Boston Herald proclaimed of McMillan, "By the end of the show, audience members were wiping tears and clapping madly. Now that's amore!"

Being a collaborator, McMillan began working with Carrey ten years ago on their first solo show, and they realized they had something that worked. Now looking back on their own partnership — and appreciating both the work and the fulfillment that comes from partnering — they are exploring the work of other partners.

Edge spoke with McMillan and Carrey about the ups and downs of partnering, not too dissimilar from a marriage, and the rich source material they are exploring for their upcoming show.

EDGE: Some partnered composers/lyricists are well known, like Lerner & Loewe, Rodgers & Hart/Hammerstein, Ahrens & Flaherty, but others, like Arlen and Mercer are less well known, partly because neither Arlen nor Mercer worked so much with a single partner. Can you give examples of their partnership?

CARREY: You are totally right. Chances are people are more likely to know Mercer and Mancini, and less likely to know Mercer and Arlen. But when [Will and I] did our Mercer show, we discovered that Arlen was Mercer's favorite partner of the hundreds he worked with.

MCMILLAN: They didn't have a big Broadway smash, although they did do the songs for *St. Louis Woman* which gave us "Come Rain or Come Shine" and "Any Place I Hang My Hat Is Home." They also had many movie scores together.

CARREY: We come at this show from a lot of different vantage points. Even though we might mention Arlen & Mercer, we might also do a medley of songs by Mercer and 10 different partners he worked with. We are weaving together a lot of different themes, in a looser way than we might have done in our previously tightly themed shows. Every song in this show has harmony in it, so unlike our previous shows, where we each sang a number of solos, we will be singing each song literally 'in perfect harmony.'

EDGE: What other more obscure partnerships will you explore and their material?

CARREY: It's interesting when you start to look at partnerships, especially over a long time period; take a song like 'Try to Remember.' It's Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt, and they've been working together for over 60 years and continue to work together. People all know *The Fantasticks*, but very few, except Broadway aficionados, would mention Jones and Schmidt as a well-known partnership. Another somewhat obscure partnership, Glenn Hansard and Marketa Irglova, wrote the song 'Falling Slowly' from *Once* (a film first, then a Broadway show). It won an Oscar for Best Song the year it came out. And when [Will and I] did [our show] *The Envelope Please* the week before the Academy Awards, we predicted ['Falling Slowly'] would win, and it did. Hansard and Irglova starred in the film, which is inspired by their romantic relationship — which ended between the film and the Broadway musical.

EDGE: I understand you plan to share something about the creative process between various renowned partners. Can you provide an example or two?

CARREY: The creative process can be summed up in two quotes by Richard Rodgers. About Hart, he said, "I was enchanted by this little man and his ideas. In one afternoon, I acquired a career, a partner, a best friend, and a permanent source of irritation." About Hammerstein, he said, "What happened between Oscar and me was almost chemical. You put the right ingredients together, and an explosion takes place."

Some of the people that we include did not write in partnerships, like Irving Berlin or Randy Newman. We use them in a context of writing for films, like Newman. Although he writes the songs by himself, he has to collaborate with

those who do the animation and the director — so his writing process is more complicated than you might think. Also, Sondheim: we have a quote from when he started writing lyrics for Bernstein, and he wasn't sure how to tell Bernstein that his lyrical suggestions were terrible.

EDGE: Describe your partnerships with pianist Doug Hammer and orchestrator Mike Callahan. What surprising contributions has each made to your show?

MCMILLAN: Doug is extraordinary. Once he gets the song in his fingertips, which is about by the third time, he can do almost anything with it.

CARREY: Also, Doug knows both our voices extremely well. So when we bring him a song, he can quickly find a key that will work for both of us. He's pretty open; if we say we love a particular sound, he'll explore it with us.

In terms of Mike, it is a collaboration made in heaven. Mike's harmonies stretch us. We give our 'comfort zone' harmony structure to Mike, and then he gives us something far more complex, that takes us places we would never go, and forces us to explore different ranges we don't normally sing in. We first started working with Mike when he was a sophomore at Harvard. Then he went to Eastman School of Music, and now he's a professor of music at Michigan State. So now we send him a rough recording with our initial harmony ideas, and he knows where to go with it. And I don't know how you even make collaborations like that. If we were trying to replicate it, that wouldn't work.

MCMILLAN: We just got new harmony ideas from Mike for 'How Do You Keep the Music Playing?' [Alan and Marilyn Bergman], and we are luxuriating in them.

CARREY: That has been our theme song: The lyrics literally describe our partnership.

EDGE: What about the creative process in your own partnership? What are some of the speed bumps you hit, and what are some examples of how your collective talents resulted in more than the sum of its parts?

MCMILLAN: It's no longer a speed bump because we've identified it, and we are more prepared for it. Bobbi has a tendency to get very analytical about the show, and looks at it logically, while I look at flow and energy, and spackle in the patter later. That push-pull tension in the past was frustrating, but it's something we've gotten much more graceful at balancing.

CARREY: The context of our lives makes a huge difference. In the past 10 years, we have gone through enormous changes individually. Our work lives, our personal lives, our family lives all affect our partnership. Thankfully, we aren't experiencing those external speed bumps at the same time. When I'm in the worst place, Will is in a good place. We buoy each other along. There were times when I wanted to put more rehearsal time in, and Will was working full time. Related to what Will describes as my analytical approach to a show, and I get excited about a song, and then I sound totally convinced it is the right thing. Then I go off and listen to it, and I say with equal conviction "I don't like that song," and it took Will time to understand that it is just my style.

MCMILLAN: It can be puzzling, that someone can be so emphatic about something, and a week later be equally emphatic about the opposite.

CARREY: The good news is — for ten years and nine shows — singing together remains blissful.

MCMILLAN: That's the heart of it. These songs are the reason we have metaphors about things and people being harmonious. When you sing, the very act of making music together makes you feel better. It opens your heart.

Will McMillan and Bobbi Carey perform In Perfect Harmony on Thursday, November 14, 8pm at Scullers Jazz Club at the Doubletree Suites Hotel, 400 Soldiers Field Road, Boston, MA. Tickets: \$20. For reservations call 617.562.4111 or visit www.scullersjazz.com.

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