



CABARET RENAISSANCE

“IN HERE, LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL.” BY DONALD CHARLES RICHARDSON

John Iachetti doesn't spend much time behind his desk at the entrance to Feinstein's. Smiling and charming, the director of entertainment greets guests and personally escorts them to their tables, as if hosting an exclusive private dinner party. His enthusiasm is infectious. There's an air of anticipation as musicians settle on the small stage, the lights dim, and a voice announces the performer. The audience applauds (when a favorite takes the stage they cheer like baseball fans). For the next 70 minutes, a talented entertainer will be close enough to touch, playing to each individual, talking and joking with the crowd. On an average night, it's exciting. On a great night, when a truly incomparable artist is at the peak of his or her powers, it's an unforgettable experience.

Cabaret in America has had its ups and downs. Popular at speakeasies during the Roaring Twenties and again at supper clubs during and after the Second World War, today it's having a renaissance in grand rooms with gourmet chefs and elaborate wine lists, as well as little, out-of-the-way clubs. "I think cabaret is popular again because it's a personal experience," says Iachetti. "For the audience, it's like sitting in a living room listening to brilliant performers tell their stories."

While cabarets occasionally feature instrumentalists or comedy acts, it's the singers that fill the rooms. The great stars, like the legendary Barbara Cook, Marilyn Maye and Michael Feinstein, blend equal measures of artistry, emotion, and nostalgia...and often dress to the nines. Michael Feinstein is

always in a tuxedo. Marilyn Maye wears a jeweled brooch, a gift from Bob Mackie and Joe McFate, as well as an enormous star sapphire ring. ("I think it's my obligation to be chic and I love jewelry," she says.) Then there are the "insiders," often brilliant entertainers with devoted followings in cabaret circles. And, of course, new performers who appear at open-mic shows, hoping for their big breaks.

New York is the bastion of cabaret. Feinstein's, currently at the Loews Regency (moving to a new location in January 2013), and the Café Carlyle at the Carlyle Hotel offer the ultimate in elegance and entertainment. Renowned for its sophisticated style, the glamorous Café Carlyle has been a classic New York destination since 1955 and still maintains the ambiance of a 1930s supper club. Famous and very fashionable guests settle back on comfortable blue-hued banquettes beneath enchanting (recently restored) Marcel Vertes murals for truly superb food and illustrious performers.

Farther downtown, there's Birdland, where on Monday nights the multi-talented Jim Caruso holds his celebrated Cast Party. At this casually elegant gathering, eminent show business names, Broadway and cabaret pros, and new talent including the staff (bartender William Minyard brings down the house when he sings) show up to perform and mingle with the audience until the wee hours of the morning.

The Duplex has been a Greenwich Village landmark for nearly 60 years. New Yorkers (and visitors anxious to explore the real thing) climb a set of

THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF FEINSTEIN'S AT THE LOEWS REGENCY; OPPOSITE PAGE: RAT JOHNSON STUDIOS; RICHARD TERMINEL; CHRISTOPHER HADLOCK



Above: The Razz Room in San Francisco **Right:** Michael Feinstein and Barbara Cook perform
Left: The Duplex in New York City's Greenwich Village



somewhat rickety stairs to a long narrow room where some of the greatest entertainers, including Barbara Steisand and Woody Allen, have appeared. Booking manager Thomas Honeck says, "The Duplex has always been a place of beginnings...giving young performers a shot, a place to feel comfortable to try new things and stretch." Today, audiences pack the room nightly for acts such as superb songstress Colleen McHugh, who offers enchanting contemporary interpretations of classic tunes, the comedic Recignos Brothers, and other fresh, innovative singers and comedy acts.

Cabaret is, fortunately, not limited to New York. In Austin, the charming Austin Cabaret Theater, produced by Stuart Moulton, has presented Carol Channing, Elaine Stritch and Natalie Douglas in her tribute to Lena Horne. The attractive Royal Room at the Colony in Palm Beach combines gourmet food with shows by some of the best cabaret performers in the business. And then there's the Razz Room in San Francisco. Owners Robert Kotonly and Rory Paull have created a plush nightclub with an extraordinary wine list and uncommon cocktails. Alternating tradition and innovation, some nights, the Razz Room sticks with the standards and the city's society figures gather for Betty Buckley or Tony Martin. On other evenings, the club encourages young people to venture into the cabaret experience with acts like The Three Degrees and Jefferson Starship.

Chances are, there's now a cabaret near you. Go hear the music play.

THE ARTIST'S VIEWPOINT

Bebe Neuwirth "There is nothing that can compare to the experience of attending a live performance. The music is more deeply felt, the performance more deeply felt...."

Barbara Cook "Cabaret is a place where honesty has a lot to do with how effective you are. You're not playing a character, you're your honest self."

Marilyn Maye "You create a real relationship with your audience; you make a moment, an evening."

Pianist Tedd Firth "I've worked with very well-known performers and first-timers. Cabaret has a common appeal: the chance to perform in an intimate setting that's unlike any other performance environment."

Natalie Douglas "Sometimes I can feel the audience's reactions...[they develop] an almost spiritual connection with me, the music, the lyrics and the musicians."

Colleen McHugh "Cabaret, at its best, provides the ultimate connection between song, performer and audience."

Jim Caruso "People have been ringing the death-knell for cabaret for years, yet it continues to thrive...."