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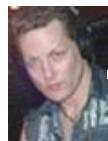
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interview: Michael McAssey

by [PJ Gray](#)

Since making his cabaret debut in 1982 in New York City's Greenwich Village, Michael McAssey's career reflects the passion of a true and gifted performer...and a survivor. In twenty-five years, McAssey has gone from cruise ship stages and notorious piano bars to the Broadway stage eventually becoming one of the country's most acclaimed cabaret entertainers. A native of Chicago, this charismatic MAC Award winner has left formidable years in Manhattan working beside numerous theatre legends to become the musical director and featured performer at Aspen, Colorado's famous Crystal Palace Piano Bar. Recently, McAssey took a few moments before hitting the stage in his hometown Chicago to talk about his not-so-typical career and the art of cabaret.



credit:
www.michaelmcassey.com

PJ: You've recorded songs from songwriting greats like Brian Lasser and Ann Hampton Callaway to Frank Loesser and Cole Porter. Was there a particular process for selecting songs that you've recorded?

MM: Well I had the good fortune to meet and become friends with both Ann and Brian many years ago in Chicago before we all moved to New York City. Ann's sister, Liz Callaway, and I were in the first shows at Marriott's Great America in Gurnee, Illinois (now Six Flags), and I knew Brian and Karen Mason through a production of Godspell where I was in directed by a mutual friend of ours. It's funny, ALL of us moved from Chicago to New York within about three months of each other, and ALL started working for the same cabaret owners—Erv Raible and Rob Hoskins who owned the Duplex and then opened Don't Tell Mama.

I spent over 12 years at "Mama's" both onstage in the cabaret and out front in the piano bar. In between theatre gigs it was always home; and you can't help but meet amazing singers and songwriters in places like that... all of us so green and getting our starts. Idina Menzel (Rent, Tony winner for Wicked) was one of my singing waitresses when she first moved to New York City. Lea DeLaria, Kathy Najimy, Mo'Nique and many amazingly talented people all worked there in the old days. I could find great material everywhere I looked. Jason Robert Brown (Parade, Songs for a New World), David Friedman (Listen To My Heart, Nancy LaMott's songs), David Zippel (City Of Angels, Woman In White), Alan Menken (Little Shop, Beauty & the Beast, etc), Stephen Flaherty (Ragtime, Suessical, Once On This Island) were all writers who became friends and were very gracious with their material

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through the years. And, of course, standards like Porter and Loesser are ALWAYS welcome, especially if you can find interesting arrangements or “takes” on them that don’t interfere but enhance the original.

PJ: Your career is certainly varied--Broadway, cabaret, television, recording. But to many you’re known best as a cabaret artist. What makes cabaret unique in the world of live performance?

MM: Cabaret is PERSONAL. Depending on the type of show, you don’t usually hide behind a character as in theatre. You’re out there naked, so to speak, and you hope the audience gets to know YOU as well as the music, and like what they see. It’s musical storytelling and the better the material you want to share with your audience, the better the show.

Now, there are a lot of different types of shows—some are autobiographical (mine usually are)—and if you have interesting stories and life experiences, it can work. A lot of shows have “themes,” which I used to hate because it was just an excuse to sing ten Cole Porter songs with no thread, no story; and even though the material is great, who wants to hear that over and over? A lot of people should leave the cabaret stage and find a nice lounge where they can just sing and be in the background.

There’s a BIG difference between cabaret and lounge singer.

PJ: How has cabaret changed since your career began?

MM: When I started in NYC (a long time ago), there were VERY few men in cabaret. Most people wanted to see the divas—especially gay men (as did I). And if you were a guy singing in cabaret, you were either a boring Frank Sinatra knock off or a big queen who SHOULD have been in drag anyway. This is not to say that can’t be enjoyable, but to just have a GUY singing and telling stories, gay or not, was rare. I had trouble getting an audience at first because of that. And to this day I was never the “darling” of the whole Algonquin set because the guy that runs it loves his divas. But I learned by watching Karen Mason, Nancy LaMott, Ann Hampton Callaway and others. I also did comedy, and I CAN camp it up when necessary, but then I turn on a dime and depress the CRAP out of you (in a good way, of course). Nowadays there are a LOT of men in cabaret—some great, some not so much—but it’s wonderful to see them OUT THERE.

PJ: Was performing on Broadway everything you expected? Why or why not?

MM: All my life all I ever wanted to do was to be “on Broadway.” And I have been, no matter what, so I’m damn grateful. Unfortunately the show I was on Broadway with was a stinker. We had a long out-of-town tryout, many changes during the run, but when we finally opened in New York it was amazing. I loved every minute of it...and minutes were all we ran on Broadway. [laughs] We did okay in previews with the audiences in New York; however, the night we opened, I sat in a limo outside Sardi’s and listened to Pia Lindstrom on NBC-TV say that she, “walked into the theatre, saw the mylar curtain and hated the show half way thru the overture...” Now I can laugh because it’s funny as hell, and that curtain WAS tacky. But after the reviews came out (and they were ALL worse than that), we had to continue to perform the show three times before we closed. Then the audiences were VERY small, and they sat with their arms crossed KNOWING they should hate it. It was painful, very painful. I learned, then, that you CAN tell an audience what to like and what NOT to like, because we had some decent shows before that, though the show itself was never really Broadway worthy.

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PJ: You now perform regularly and reside in Aspen, Colorado. Most people think of Aspen and think "snow" not "show". How does an Aspen audience differ from a Manhattan audience?

MM: Well, actually a lot of New Yorkers spend time in Aspen—especially during the summer with the Music Festival—but Aspen is a mixture of all types these days. I love the audiences in Aspen because of that. The rich, celebrities, cowboys, hippies left over from the 70's, moms and dads, and my favorite... the GAY audience. I don't care where you are. Give me a hip, ready-to-laugh-and-cry gay audience ANYTIME!

PJ: With so many Christmas CDs recorded on the market, what were your thoughts when you began creating your CD, Home for Christmas, and how did you try to make it your own?

MM: Christmas is my favorite time of year, and the music is so diverse.

I wanted to do songs that made me remember being a kid, and also songs that speak to who I am now as an adult. Again, since I knew awesome writers it was easy to find songs. The hard part was cutting songs off the album. I wanted to have familiar standards alongside new songs that SHOULD be standards in the future—some serious, some romantic and some damn funny.

PJ: Seeing Broadway included in your credentials seems appropriate. I just didn't expect to see a soap opera credit (CBS-TV's Guiding Light). How did that happen?

MM: A friend of mine was the director of my first cabaret show (and all of them for many years), and he was also a casting director on Light. He always gave his friends little bits to do to help us pay the rent from time to time, and at one point he had me come in to read for a speaking role.

The part was a blind piano player named George, who was directing the annual Christmas pageant at the local school for the blind. One of the lead characters on the show had been blinded in a bombing accident and had gone there to learn how to cope with life. She meets me, blind Barry Manilow, and I help her deal. But the drama was that I was rushed to the hospital on Christmas Eve right before the pageant because a cornea donor had been found. I got my sight back and was never heard from again.

PJ: Now, let's talk La LuPone. Is there anything about her that would surprise the readers?

MM: Well, I guess what would surprise the readers is that she's one hell-of-an-awesome gal. Everyone thinks she's supposed to be this demanding diva and not a nice person; but the lady knows her shit and just expects you to know yours. I worked with her in Paris and she was wonderful. We had such a great time. I came back to the States and all anybody wanted to know was how big a bitch she was... Well, I had no stories like that to tell, so I was a big disappointment at cocktail parties. [laughs] Two years later, I made my Broadway debut with her brother Robert, who I understudied as the lead in Late Nite Comic. Patti was in Uptown that same week opening in Anything Goes. I should have stuck with the first LuPone.

McAssey can be found performing summer and winter seasons in Aspen at the Crystal Palace, and often in New York City, Chicago and Los Angeles. For more information about Michael McAssey, go to: www.michaelmcassey.com.

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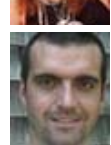
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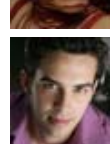
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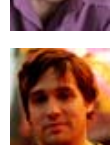
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