

Preview

Tri-C JazzFest: Michael Feinstein — a conversation about *The Gershwins and Me*

by Mike Telin



Known as "The Ambassador of the Great American Songbook," Columbus native [Michael Feinstein](#) will make his [Tri-C JazzFest](#) debut with his popular show *The Gershwins and Me* on Friday, April 26 at 8:00 pm in the Palace Theatre at Playhouse Square.

Feinstein, a multi-platinum-selling, two-time Emmy and five-time Grammy Award-nominated entertainer, performs more than 200 shows a year in such venues as Carnegie Hall, the Sydney

Opera House, Buckingham Palace and the White House as well as his Manhattan nightclub, Feinstein's at Loews Regency.

In addition to serving on The Library of Congress's National Sound Recording Advisory Board, Feinstein also hosts the popular NPR show *Song Travels*. He is the director of a new popular music series for Jazz at Lincoln Center and in 2007, he created the Michael Feinstein Great American Songbook Initiative, now headquartered in Carmel, Indiana. With its mission to bring the music of the Great American Songbook to young people today and to preserve it for future generations, The Great American Songbook Initiative's activities include a high school vocal competition, The Great American Songbook Hall of Fame, numerous educational activities and an archive and gallery.

Beginning in 2011, Feinstein became the Artistic Director of the new Carmel (Indiana) Performing Arts Center, and in August, 2012 he was named principal pops conductor of the Pasadena Pops, replacing the late Marvin Hamlisch. His new book and CD package, "The Gershwins and Me: A Personal History in Twelve Songs," was published in October 2012 by Simon & Schuster.

If you're wondering when Michael Feinstein ever sleeps, "I don't" he jokingly told me during our telephone conversation. Feinstein is as engaging in conversation as he is on stage. We talked about many of his current endeavors but I began by asking him to talk about his Tri-C JazzFest show.

Michael Feinstein: After writing “The Gershwin’s and Me”, I realized that it had been quite some time since I had done a Gershwin show, and the book is one that enabled me to finally put in a more permanent form some of the stories and anecdotes of history that I’ve learned about the Gershwin era that haven’t necessarily been preserved by others. Because I was in a unique position to be able to meet many people who were associated with that world, I wanted to memorialize a lot of the information. And it became obvious to me that it was time to create a new Gershwin concert incorporating the anecdotes and stories and putting them in the context of the text.

It’s a show that is very rich in history and I think it’s one of the most generously received shows that I’ve done in a long time. People have responded so enthusiastically to it and I’m very grateful for that.

Mike Telin: I love the book and the CD. I know it has been referred to as a coffee table book but mine has not sat there very much.

MF: [laughing] And it makes me wonder, does anyone still have a coffee table?

MT: I know! When did you get the idea to put the book together?

MF: It was at least a five year process, perhaps longer. I wrote a book in the mid 90’s but it was not exclusively devoted to the Gershwins and it was somewhat dictated by what the publisher wanted, even though there was certainly a great deal about the Gershwins in it. But this book is one that I wanted make sure included the visuals and new recordings of the songs so it is different in that sense. But it was at least five years.

MT: That is a long time to devote to a single project, but you certainly had a lot of material to comb through.

MF: Yes, and of course I was always thinking what about this or that, but there’s always things like that.

MT: Perhaps there is a second one to come.

MF: I guess there could be.

MT: You are considered to be the keeper of the Great American Songbook and I’m curious to know how you define it.

MF: It’s music that has transcended the time in which it was written and still has resonance for a contemporary audience. The pedigree of a song doesn’t matter to me, it’s the quality and it’s lasting value. In other words there could be a song written in 1911 like *Alexander’s Ragtime Band* that still touches people. But there also could be a Billy Joel song that means just as much. In other words I don’t think there are boundaries on the specific era of the Great American Songbook. It is ever-evolving and there are probably songs that are being created today that will still be around in twenty years although I could not identify them. It is only time that determines that.

MT: What first attracted you to the music of that era?

MF: It was an emotional response at a very early age. Of course when I was five years old the music that we now call the Great American Songbook was the primary music that we heard. Not only on radio, even though there were stations that played rock and roll there were still stations that exclusively played classic songs, and then there were all the television commercials, the unending elevator music, as well as all of the variety shows that all featured this music. So it was music that I grew up with, and I was more touched by that music than the contemporary music that was also being played on the radio. The Beatles did not particularly interest me but Jerome Kern did. Even though I didn't know the names of the writers and I didn't know where these songs came from, it was an emotional response.

MT: I read an interview where you said that you felt the lack of culture in today's society was adding to our social divide. Would you mind saying a little more? I found it to be a very interesting observation.

MF: The deprivation of culture in today's society can be directly correlated with the divide we have politically and emotionally because what culture and art brings to us is a common ground that opens our hearts and makes us feel better about life. It inspires us and gives us a certain sense of humanity that can't be acquired in any other way. And technology has replaced the arts in schools and while technology is extremely important, the isolation of humanity, the isolation of all of us is a tragic experience that has manifested itself in the lack of co-operation in politics because people don't have a buffer to explore common humanity.

MT: You are certainly doing more than your fair share to remedy this situation with your vocal music competitions, The Great American Songbook Museum, the NPR Shows. How did you manage to create so many programs?

MF: One step at a time. [laughing] One of the wonderful things is meeting so many young people who care about classic songs and care about jazz and classical music. These are all kids who are excluded by shows like American Idol — which is not about talent, it's about producers getting rich. That's the bottom line, it's not really about anything else regardless of how it's portrayed. But there are lots of young people that do not have an outlet for their diverse musical interests and I can relate to that because my musical interests were different from most of my contemporaries when I was growing up. And the enthusiasm, appreciation and understanding of this classic music is something that I think is rather extraordinary.

I also think about a friend of mine who told me that when his son was three his favorite music was *West Side Story* and it was not something he understood but it touched him, and he did not like Barney. So it is important to not musically underestimate young people. But they have to be exposed to it, and with the Internet today, people can find any kind of music. You can see clips of any great artist and hear their music with the touch of a button. What I wouldn't have given to have had that when I was young.

MT: Yes, that would have been quite nice. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk.

MF: Thank you for your interest.

Published on clevelandclassical.com April 16, 2013