

“The Changing Face of Cabaret”

by Roy Sander

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“Do people really do that sort of thing in cabaret?” That was Gregory Henderson’s response when a producer suggested doing his show “Big Wind on Campus” at *Don’t Tell Mama*. The answer to Henderson’s question is a resounding “yes.” Cabaret in America has traditionally been a venue for singers, vocal groups, comedians, revues, and occasional specialty acts, such as female impersonators. But the times they have a changed. Clubs in New York abound with entertainment of remarkable diversity: one- and two-act plays, book musicals, musical comedy, characterization, performance art, and works so original that they are not easily classifiable.

The people performing in cabaret are also a new mixture, with singers and comics sharing the stage with actors and writers. Even artists in the more traditional forms have seized upon this freedom and devised ever more imaginative programming. While many vocalists continue to do highly satisfying shows of nothing but songs, others are presenting highly conceptual evenings in which songs are only one element of a broader agenda.

We spoke with the creators and performers of several of these shows. In addition to explaining why they chose cabaret as their venue, some talked about the factors that led them--or drove them to do a show in the first place and about the creative route they took to get there, which were often as singular as the shows themselves. We first asked booking managers--the people responsible for choosing the acts that appear at the clubs--their perspective on this phenomenon.

the view from the booking managers’ office

Amelia David, booking manager of *The Duplex*, says, “The percentage of our shows that are non-traditional averages above 50%. We have found that we must be able to take in new types of entertainment. They tend to attract larger audiences. For example, ‘Dressing Room Divas,’ a one-act comedy with celebrity impersonation, is in its fourth year. By taking in more money, we can afford to present the traditional shows. Also, the non-traditional shows attract a new audience, people who might not go to see a singer, but would see a drag show or a comedy. Once you get them in there, they’ll usually be back.” She reports that *The Duplex* recently installed new sound and lighting systems and back and front curtains in order to “attract more traditional vocalists *and* be a space that can be anything to anyone. I have long felt that that’s the only way cabaret can survive.” She sees an increasing number of people using the club to work on material before taking it to other venues. For example, Nathaniel Eaton tried out his piece about being lost in Africa, “The Dream at the End of the Universe,” before entering it in a Kennedy Center competition.

Collette Black points out that “Nonsense,” which has been a smash hit in theatres internationally, began as a cabaret show in the room that is now *Upstairs at Rose’s Turn*, where she is booking manager. She says that only 20% of the shows at her club feature vocalists; the rest are sketch comedy, improvisation, plays, and theatre pieces. Among the noteworthy works that played the room are “Flight of the Goddamned Butterfly,” a one-act play, and “Below the Valley of the Dolls,” a camp musical. She comments that cabaret provides a very cost-effective way to produce a show. As an example, “The Club,” which was a hit Off-Broadway in 1976, recently had a highly acclaimed revival at *Upstairs at Rose’s Turn*. It had an Equity cast and was produced under an *experimental cafe* contract, under which actors receive no salary and the run is limited to eight performances. Plans are underway to move it to Off-Broadway.

Sidney Myer, booking manager for *Don't Tell Mama*, points out some of the economic and operational advantages that cabaret offers over theatre. "At a club, producers don't have to pay for such items as insurance, janitorial services, box office staff, and ASCAP and BMI royalties--not to mention rent. They also get lighting and a piano, which theatres don't always provide. Clubs also offer scheduling flexibility. You can play once, twice, or three times a week without worrying about having to pay a full week's rent." He adds, "Directors and musical directors see the cabaret rooms very creatively. More often than not, these 'experimental' outings turn out to be very successful."

musicals of all sorts

In commenting on why the producers of "Honky-Tonk Highway," a two-act book musical, chose to present it at *Don't Tell Mama*, **Steve Steiner**, who conceived the show and was its musical director, explains, "It cost a lot less money than doing it at an Off-Broadway theatre. Also, it was produced under Equity's *cabaret contract*, which offers more latitude than the standard Off-Broadway contract. This combination enabled us to stay open longer [seven months], giving us time to gain attention," far more time, for example, than if they had done it as a theatrical *showcase*. This turned out to be a critical factor, because several influential people, among them the representative from the Goodspeed Opera House, didn't see it until rather late in the run. The show subsequently enjoyed an 11-week extended run at *Goodspeed at Chester*, and there have been several other productions in theatres as large as 1200 seats. "Honky-Tonk Highway opens May 25 at *Broadhollow's Bayway Arts Center* in East Islip, Long Island, and a national tour is in the works.

"Beyond the Window," a multi-media musical theatre-piece about voyeurism, is about as non-traditional as you can get. **Michael Schubert**, the show's writer, composer, and director, says, "It was Amy Coleman's striking Beatles cabaret show a few years back, directed by Brian Lasser, that gave me the idea that I could do 'Beyond the Window' in a cabaret. I had considered a downtown performance space, but I had the feeling that there wasn't the same sense of open community as there is in cabaret, that it would not be as easy to break into." The show ran at *Don't Tell Mama* for six months. Schubert also extols the advantage of being able to play a long time. "A lot of industry people got to see it, but few of them came in the first few months." One producer was so impressed, he asked Schubert to write a new show; that show, "Shabbatai," went on to have an extended run at the American Jewish Theatre. Schubert points out another virtue of cabaret: when the first production of a piece is presented by a theatre company, unlike cabaret, the theatre often retains ownership of a sizable percentage of it, which cuts into the writer's share of all future productions.

Paul Scott Goodman cites another of cabaret's virtues: the relative ease of getting a show on the boards. "Domestica," a contemporary one-act opera about a typical but pivotal day in the life of a housewife and mother, has two people onstage: the central character and a guitarist, which at *Don't Tell Mama* was Goodman, who wrote the piece. He says, "I did it in cabaret because I knew I could get it on right away. I had become frustrated dealing with theatres. Even if they were interested, it took so much time--it was one meeting after another." Some prominent people have since expressed interest in presenting it in a theatre as part of a bill with Goodman's "Tiny Dancer," a solo piece about a man about to become a father, which he performed a few years ago at *The Duplex*.

"Lance Jonathan--All About Me," a one-act musical, is an affectionate spoof in which the world's most optimistic perennial chorus boy tells about his life in show business. It was written and performed by **Peter-Michael Marino**, who had developed the character as his contribution to a show called "Character Witness." "Two things inspired me to develop it further," Marino says. "I first got the idea

when I was sitting in the Equity lounge and noticed a bunch of tenors warming up for an audition. Then I saw several cabaret acts in which performers related the songs they sang to anecdotes about their lives, and I decided to combine the two. I had no idea it would turn into a book musical.” He is currently writing a follow-up piece, “Lance Jonathan--More About Me.” “Lately I’ve seen a lot of innovative work in the clubs and thought, ‘wow, you can really do a lot in cabaret,’ so I’m approaching my new piece with a greater sense of freedom.”

impersonation and portrayal

While impersonation has long been a part of the scene, two shows have gone far beyond what we are accustomed to seeing in cabaret. More than mimicry, they are richly textured revelations of the person underneath the voice and mannerisms.

“Totie,” a solo musical about comedienne Totie Fields, has had a lot of lives in theatres, comedy clubs, and cabarets (in New York, at *The Ballroom*, and more recently, *Don’t Tell Mama*). Co-author and star **Nancy Timpanaro** says, “We tailored the show to accommodate the venue. The one place I never wanted to do it was cabaret because I thought it was a theatre piece. I’ve learned since that if a show has a real heart or truth, it will pretty much play in any venue. Because it is so expensive to work in theatre, there is no room to experiment, to let a show breathe and evolve. Once a show opens in a theatre, it tends to be frozen. In cabaret, I have the feeling ‘leap and the net will be there.’ Also, because of the intimacy of cabaret, I was able to learn more about the show from audience response and interaction than I could in theatre.”

“Cocktails With Marilyn” paints a trenchant, touching and funny portrait of Marilyn Monroe. **Katie La Bourdette**, who co-adapted the piece from Marilyn's writings, had been impersonating the film legend for ten years at events, parties, and in “Legends in Concert,” which played in several cities in the U.S. and Japan. “When I started writing dialogue, I realized that no one had really portrayed Marilyn as I’d come to know her through my research. I felt compelled to get it out there, to show how smart and funny Marilyn was.” A producer saw the resulting cabaret show; the upshot is that plans are underway to mount an expanded two-act version at a major regional theatre this summer. Though the show may wind up in a theatre, La Bourdette says, “Cabaret is a venue where an artist can take a piece and work it out.” The show returns to *Don’t Tell Mama* for two more performances: Mar. 15 and 29.

other innovators

The cabaret stage has seen many vocal groups, but none like the Jenny Burton Experience. Lead vocalist Jenny Burton is as much a presence as she is a singer, and she is backed by a nine-voice choir that does much more than back-up. As with gospel, the group’s aim is spiritual uplift, but its style and appeal transcend the boundaries of gospel. “We never felt that this was a cabaret act,” says **Peter Link**, the group’s songwriter, director, and arranger. “We thought it was a recording act, and we wanted to attract record companies. The traditional way to do this is to send tapes to the companies’ offices, but we have more than a sound to offer, so we wanted them to come and see.” As a promotional strategy, a small club was chosen. “We wanted people to be blown away and to say, ‘boy, this group needs to move into a larger space.’ Also, record companies are impressed when we tell them we played to sold-out houses in New York for a year-and-a-half. The length of the run has given us an incredible opportunity to see what works and what doesn’t, and to shape the direction of the act.” The group has gone on to play around the country in halls as large as 10,000. “We enjoyed all that, but when we got back to *Don’t Tell Mama*, it

was a huge lift for all of us. It was like coming home.” (Their second run continues through March and April.)

Written and performed by actor **Gregory Henderson**, “Big Wind on Campus” is set in a small southwestern university. In it, Henderson plays six characters--four male, two female. Frustrated by the scarcity of good roles in theatre and by the difficulty of getting casting directors to see him, he wrote the piece “to show what I can do. I realized it wasn’t going to just happen--you have to make it happen for yourself.” The show began as a single-character sketch, which he did as part of an evening at the *Peculiar Works Project*. The response was so great that he expanded the piece, though it never entered his mind to do it in a cabaret until a producer suggested it. The show had a couple of cabaret engagements, sandwiched around a theatrical run. Henderson said that whereas it was difficult getting theatre critics to cover him at the theatre, he had considerably more success getting cabaret critics to cover the show at the club because it had the appeal of being different. Henderson has since gone on to play “Big Wind on Campus” in theatres in several states and in colleges and universities all over the country (in March, he will be appearing at Rutgers and Connecticut State).

“I Want My Token Back,” **Bryan Johnson**’s evening of songs, character sketches, and poems about the experiences and indignities of riding the New York City subway system, is possibly the most improbable cabaret show we’re discussing. Johnson says, “In 1992, I was preoccupied with the resentment I felt at all I had to put up with waiting for and riding on the N train. So I started writing about it (it’s cheaper than therapy).” He wound up with two volumes of 50 pieces each, which he circulated among friends. He balked at suggestions that his work should be staged. After an evening at *Musical Theatre Works*, a few of the pieces were included in a 1994 workshop production of a revue about life in New York, and they went over very well. It was director Lisa Asher’s idea to assemble them into an hour-length show and present it at *The Duplex*, where it ran five months. More recently, it played an additional three months at *Don’t Tell Mama*. Johnson is now exploring Off-Broadway possibilities.

other innovations

Some performers whose shows seem relatively mainstream have rather particular reasons for doing them.

Barbara Fasano’s show has the classic singer-with-back-up-musicians format. What *is* different is that instead of playing a concentrated run of a few weeks, Fasano plans to continue doing about one performance a month. “With cabaret, you can make the choice of when you want to work. Nothing happens if you stay at home in your apartment.” An actress as well as a singer, she wants to stay visible on the scene to give casting directors and agents a chance to see her, and she’s not worried about whether she will attract large audiences. “It’s not about having 50 people in the house, it’s about being able to have that guy from RCA see you.” Her next show at *Don’t Tell Mama* is March 12.

Crayton Robey is an actor who went to the Cabaret Symposium at the O’Neill Center on a whim. He says, “I love the art form. I’m moved every time I go.” When he recently did his first cabaret act, he had two objectives. The first was simply putting on a good show. “I also wanted to demonstrate what I can do,” so he invited casting directors, writers, and producers. The result: he is now up for the lead in an independent feature film.

Although it had already been optioned for Broadway, **Chris Curtis** performed an evening of songs from his book musical “In the Limelight,” about the life of Charlie Chaplin, at Eighty-Eights and Don’t Tell Mama. “I never considered it a cabaret show and I didn’t consider myself a cabaret performer,” he says. “I did it to let the theatre community hear the piece, to get a buzz going.” That it did, and a host of

prominent actors and industry people went to see it--as did investors. "I had another reason: I wanted to see how the audience reacted to each number."

This is just a small sampling of the exciting new work being done in cabaret today. While the people interviewed all had positive things to say about their cabaret experiences, perhaps the sweetest statement was made by Gregory Henderson: "It's the most amazing thing. It did just what I wanted it to: I'm making a living as an actor now. I don't know whether this would have happened had it not been for cabaret."

