

## **“It’s Not about You”** by Roy Sander

Time was when cabaret was a performing arts form in which audience members sat at tables and the people on stage had a job to do: to entertain the audience. Period. Rather simple, eh? Alas, at some point during the past decade or so, cabaret took a wrong turn. Today, a growing number of people, especially recent entrants into the field, seem to think that cabaret is something else—some kind of mushy, touchy-feely group-therapy session, in which we are all there to share in the performer’s life and feelings. I won’t take time right now to examine the causes of this regrettable development; I think it’s more important to focus on quashing it.

The most common manifestation of this misconception is the inclusion of autobiographical information in cabaret shows. A few months ago, a singer explicitly expressed this vision of cabaret when she said to her audience at the end of her act, “This is cabaret; you’re supposed to leave having learned something about me” or words to that effect. How presumptuous. Why on earth should singers think that the audience is interested in *their* lives? A more apposite statement would have been, “This is cabaret; you’re supposed to leave thinking that your money was well spent.”

To the best of my knowledge, no formal job description has ever been written for the position of cabaret entertainer. If one were, the objective of the job would be expressed in terms of your obligation to the *audience*: to please, to move, to amuse, to inform. The objective would not mention *you*. In describing *how* you should accomplish that objective, the job description would talk in terms of the *material*: understanding and interpreting it, and communicating that insight to the audience. And it would identify the *skills* needed to do this effectively.

Where *do* you come into the picture? *You* select which songs to sing, it is *you* who determines what point of view to give each song, it is *your* sense of life that informs your interpretations, and it is *your* talent that is required to put it all across. I submit that these elements give the audience a much more intimate and revealing view of you than it would derive from learning where you grew up, why you moved to New York, or what a particular song means to you.

Mind you, this does not mean that under no circumstances *may* you include such information. A line of autobiographical dialogue *can* help to set up a song—but note that this device is effective not because it tells us about *you*, but because it establishes a context or creates a subtext, thereby tuning the audience’s antennas as it were. And remember, if your song interpretation is artful, setup may not be necessary; if it isn’t, no amount of introductory material can compensate. In general, autobiographical patter should have at least one of the following attributes: (1) it is insightful, making observations that have resonance beyond your own life and experience; (2) it is uncommonly well phrased and, so, qualifies as spoken literature; (3) it is funny.

There are other manifestations of this same phenomenon. A singer recently said out into the audience: “(*her husband’s full name*), I love you.” Though she did this as part of the setup for a song, it was downright icky and cringe-making. At the end of her show, she thanked friends who’d traveled considerable distances to see her show—and to make matters worse, she named them individually and identified the origin of each friendship. Both of these choices might be appropriate when performing for an audience solely of friends and relatives, who could reasonably be expected to be interested in her love for her husband and in knowing about her friends. In other words, it is unprofessional. When you are performing a show, you should assume that no one in the audience knows or cares about you. As you write your patter, repeat this mantra: “No one knows me, no one cares about me. No one knows me, no one cares about me.”

Speaking of thank you’s, I will go so far as to suggest that they don’t belong in cabaret shows at all. Of course, you should *acknowledge* the onstage musicians so that the audience can applaud them—but that’s different from a “thank you”; similarly, it might be appropriate to acknowledge the person running lights and sound. But that’s it. If you want to thank your director, your vocal coach, the person who did your flyers, the booking manager, the wait staff, whomever, then do so—after the show. Do you realize how annoying it is for the audience to be asked to applaud after each name you recite as you perform this misguided ritual? During their curtain calls, do theatre actors and actresses thank her dressers or the theatre ushers? Why do you think the audience gives a damn about to whom *you* are grateful?

Indeed, the only people you should consider thanking are the audience—the people who left the comfort of their homes and paid to see you. (An exception can be made on special occasions, such as closing night of a long run. Because a different dynamic prevails at such events, the audience would be more receptive to personal thank you’s.)

Another nearly always ill-advised practice is articulating your personal philosophy of life in your patter. Though I’ve seen this done many times, never has the wisdom expressed risen above greeting-card banality. And when the speaker giving us advice on how to live is in his or her early 20s, it is especially ludicrous. While I’m at it, let me caution against making gratuitous political remarks; you risk alienating a significant portion of your audience. (Note that I said *gratuitous*; if political commentary is integral to your show, it might be appropriate.)

Why is all of this important? Because if cabaret is to be taken seriously by the general public, not just by the insular world of cabaret aficionados, its practitioners need to treat it professionally, and not as some sort of informal get-together, encounter session, or journey to self-awareness.

### **Feedback and Follow-Up**

I received a few comments on my first column that I think are worth passing on. (I quote them below with the commentators’ permission.)

Rich Siegel offered the following additional counsel regarding my suggestion that singers know what key they sing a song in when they sit in at a piano bar. (I don't have sufficient technical knowledge of music to take a position on his advice, but I hope you will find it helpful.)

When asking a pianist to transpose, make it as easy as possible. Most singers don't consider that there's a difference between an easy and a difficult transposition. You can make it as easy as possible by picking a key that's closely related to the original key. This is difficult to understand for those who don't know music theory inside out. Closely related does not necessarily mean close by. For example, transposing a whole step up or down, or a fourth or fifth away is much easier than transposing to a tri-tone or to a third, and if you only want to transpose to a half-step away you really don't need to transpose at all. Also, it can be a big help to write the chord symbols of the new key above the staff, next to the chord symbols of the old key. Again, knowledge of music theory helps, and doing this writing exercise is not essential, but if it's possible, it gives the musicians the new key in chord symbols even if the "dots" (the musical notation) remain in the old key.

Philis Raskind made the following comment on the issue of what a singer should do to hold focus during an instrumental interlude:

I am reminded of Peggy Lee's attitude during musical breaks in a song. She turned to give rapt attention to her piano player (or drummer or bass player). Her very stillness made the audience aware of both singer and "player"...just another take on that situation.

I think that this approach is excellent for a relatively long instrumental solo. I agree that it can heighten focus—especially if the interlude is an integral part of the artistic vision of the interpretation. Also, it can avoid the uncomfortable alternatives of having the singer just stand/sit there *trying* to act, or simply standing like a lump. However, I think that for a short solo, it risks breaking focus.

Rich Siegel also weighed in on maintaining focus; I completely agree with his point of view:

The tradition in jazz of applauding for solos and introducing musicians after solos always bugged me, and bugs me just as much as it insinuates itself into the cabaret world. To me, a piece of music is a whole work, and should not be interrupted at all. In going from vocal to instrumental solo and back to vocal, or, if instrumental, going from melody to solo and back again, the transitions need to be part of the artistry. This is obscured by applause and/or introductions. I particularly hate it when applause covers up the beginning of an instrumental solo or the opening line of a vocal, as the first statement is a very important part of a presentation.