

Wayne Hosford gives delightful performance at The Colony

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It's all about enjoyment, and intimacy. ... You can do anything in cabaret — and it's an endangered species."

So said Wayne Hosford, cabaret singer and pianist extraordinaire, Saturday night in the Royal Room of The Colony. The setting was indeed intimate, a small dining room where patrons had just enjoyed a delightful dinner. After dessert and coffee, the lights dimmed, drummer Neel Shukla set up a beat and Hosford entered from the back of the room.

His voice, at least for the opening number, was like Frank Sinatra's; his appearance like a young Patrick Stewart. Hosford is a facile improviser, with words as well as with notes, and he altered the lyrics to I Got Rhythm to suit the setting. This quickly morphed into Drum Boogie, a favorite from his childhood, then he came back to Gershwin.

Hosford grew up in Coconut Grove, and used to delight in the productions of the Coconut Grove Playhouse. He easily works this love of music theatre into his cabaret, and the next number was Old Friends from Stephen Sondheim's Merrily We Roll Along, in a stirring performance.

Johnny Mercer was celebrated in a delightful performance of Accentuate the Positive done in a gospel blues style — not the way it's usually heard, but then Mercer was from Savanna, Ga., and knew that music well.

After a rarely heard vocal version of Laura, Hosford surprised us with a performance of Fever. He left the piano, and with only Shukla's drums, turned the song into beat poetry. The lyrics were altered freely, and he managed to include a hilarious imitation of Katharine Hepburn, second only to that of Stephanie Miller, and another of Richard Nixon's fever for Pat.

Shukla, is should be said, was a real asset. His playing was subtle and rock solid. He's mastered the difficult art of saying just what needs to be said, without any extraneous notes.

Hosford is nothing if not versatile. After an instrumental version of the Beatles Hard Day's Night, done in boogie piano style, he moved to another Sondheim song, And We Can Whistle. He quoted the composer saying "this was my Send in the Clowns before I wrote Send in the Clowns, an apt description for the achingly beautiful song.

Moving from the sublime to the hilarious, Hosford reinterpreted Paul Simon's Fifty Ways to Leave your Lover. He asked us to imagine an orthopedic surgeon, down on his luck in the current economy, and changed the lyric to Fifty Ways to Break your Femur. Not only were his lyrics amazingly inventive, but he delivered a credible impersonation of Simon's singing.

And on it went — a tribute to Peter Allen with When My Baby Smiles at Me, I go to Rio, and Quiet, Please, There's a Lady on the Stage; a rollicking version of And All That Jazz, from Chicago, all had the audience enthralled. He even included one of his own songs, a charming if predictable number.

The last piece, MacArthur's Park ,was something of an unfortunate choice — a glorious melody and arrangement serving one of the silliest sets of lyrics ever penned (what was Jimmy Webb thinking?). It tempts the performer to over-interpret, and apparently Hosford can withstand anything but temptation. The same indulgent approach was heard in his encore, Cole Porter's classic Night and Day.

Despite these missteps, Hosford is a warm, inventive, charming and talented performer, and the evening was a delight.

"Here's to us, and to endangered elegance!" More than once, Hosford led his audience in a toast to the intimate delights of cabaret. One can only respond, "hear, hear!"

He will perform Friday and Saturday at The Colony.

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