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Michael Feinstein is in the national treasure business

The American Songbook singer is the driving force behind a Midwestern performing arts center and the subject of a documentary.



By Josh Getlin, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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He's the most prominent ambassador of the Great American Songbook, an urbane evangelist who carries a torch for George Gershwin, Irving Berlin and Cole Porter in swank nightclubs and elegant concert halls.

But in his spare time, long after crowds have gone home, Michael Feinstein takes off his tuxedo and gets his hands dirty:

He sifts through piles of musty sheet music in New York flea markets, looking for Broadway gems. He digs through Hollywood dumpsters for priceless recordings of old musicals that studios discard. He prowls Midwest yard sales for vintage showbiz memorabilia.

"We're talking about a culture of classic popular music that is one of America's great gifts to the world, and it's in danger of disappearing unless we preserve it for future generations," said Feinstein on a recent afternoon, relaxing in the living room of his Upper East Side Manhattan townhouse. "These are the passions of my life."

They're all on display in "Michael Feinstein's American Songbook," a three-part PBS documentary that begins Wednesday. Produced by Amber Edwards, the new series might be the network's first reality show: It offers a real-time glimpse into Feinstein's life as he jets across the country, performing with small combos, tracking down rare music in unlikely places and shmoozing happily with other collectors.

A boyish-looking 54, Feinstein campaigns tirelessly for a golden age of music that is often marginalized and ignored by American pop culture. He doesn't simply perform standards to keep the tradition alive; he pointedly reminds audiences what makes them great. And he's determined to reach a generation of younger listeners who may think "The Lady is a Tramp" was written for an episode of "Glee."

"Michael is a man going in many directions at once, and we tried to get it all," said Edwards, who has hours of additional footage in the can and hopes to persuade PBS to air a second set of documentaries next year. "We flew around the country with him in a small private jet, and our equipment was so heavy they had to stop to refuel every three hours. We wanted to convey the sense of what it's like to be an unbelievably busy performer, historian and music collector, all rolled into one."

Good luck finding down time on Feinstein's calendar: The five-time Grammy nominee is also artistic director for the new \$150-million Center for the Performing Arts in Carmel, Ind., which opens in January. The complex, which includes a 1,600-seat hall plus smaller venues, will house the Michael Feinstein Foundation for the Preservation of the Great American Songbook — a public library and archive storing his collection of rare recordings, orchestrations, sheet music, poster and other cultural artifacts, plus the holdings of other collectors.

Between gigs, Feinstein is finishing a book about Gershwin's songs; he's working with producer Marc Platt ("Wicked") on a movie project — now in development at DreamWorks — about the composer's life. He's also director of the newly launched popular music series at Jazz at Lincoln Center. Feinstein shares homes in New York and Los Angeles with Terrence Flannery, whom he married two years ago in a California ceremony.

Edwards takes us behind the scenes: Seconds before he begins a show in Indianapolis, the singer, suffering from the flu, coughs violently, composes himself and strolls onstage with a million-dollar smile.

Joy blossoms on his face when he listens to rare recordings in the cluttered New York homes of collectors Peter Minton and Vince Giordano. "Do you ever look at this stuff and say: 'I know I'll die and never listen to most of what's here?'" he asks Giordano, marveling at his sprawling music collection. "Do you think about that? I do."

The PBS shows are broken into three historical segments, focusing on music from the 1920s through the 1960s. They're packed with videos and recordings of Frank Sinatra, Duke Ellington, Rosemary Clooney, Ethel Waters, Cab Calloway, Porter, Berlin and other giants.

But you won't see ads for the usual TV companion book after each show. Instead, viewers will be invited to sign onto a new and growing website — *michaelfeinstainsamericansongbook.org* — that offers a rich history of classic American popular songs and those who wrote them.

"We've designed it to be the ultimate companion for the documentary, a guide for the 21st century," said historian Ken Bloom, the show's executive producer. Browsers can click on a song or performer for information, he said, plus audio and video links and teaching materials.

"It's a goldmine that will be available free of charge to anyone in the world who has an Internet connection," Bloom added. "People in Russia and Eastern Europe love Ella Fitzgerald, but they don't have a lot of information about her. Jazz is huge in Japan and other nations, and they could tap into this as well. We want to get all of the material out there."

The key word is "access." It's not enough to preserve historically endangered recordings and artifacts, Feinstein says. You have to make them available to the public, which is the goal of his new museum.

But why Indiana?

Feinstein, a slightly built man with dark hair, laughs and answers: "Why not Indiana? The Great American Songbook belongs to the heartland as much as New York or L.A. Indiana was home to songwriters like Cole Porter and Hoagy Carmichael." Although he was initially tempted to put his library in Hollywood or Manhattan, backers of the Carmel performing arts facility gave him generous space for a nominal fee.

When visitors enter the museum, they will be greeted by a multimedia timeline of the Great American Songbook. They'll also see an autographed, first edition of Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" donated by Feinstein. Other holdings include a huge sheet music collection from San Francisco curator Bob Grimes; a treasure trove of rare vinyl, lacquer discs and CDs from historian Will Friedwald; an archive of Andrews Sisters memorabilia plus donations from Bloom and many others.

"These collectors didn't want their holdings buried in a basement just to have them preserved," said Doris Anne Sadler, the foundation director. "We accepted their materials with the promise that people from all over the world would be able to see them in a public setting. And we're going to honor that promise, to make this a true resource."

Sadler conceded, however, that the goal is not just to connect with the older generation that loves this music. You have to reach the kids.

Feinstein felt a deep attachment to classic American popular music even as a boy growing up in Columbus, Ohio. While others listened to the Beatles, he collected Gershwin albums. Later, after moving to Los Angeles in 1977, a string of chance encounters led him to lyricist Ira Gershwin, for whom he became an archivist. From there, introductions to Clooney, Liza Minnelli and others helped launch his career.

"I know there are other kids out there who feel the same connection to this music that I did," he said. "They're everywhere. They're in high schools across America, and the big challenge is to reach them."

For the last two years Feinstein has sponsored the Great American Songbook High School Academy and Competition, a master class and contest for teenagers in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky, Michigan, Iowa and Wisconsin. The Indianapolis event attracts hundreds of entries, and he's planning similar programs in California and New York.

In June, the winner of this year's challenge won a free trip to New York City and an opportunity to sing at Feinstein's elegant nightclub in the Regency Hotel. Annie Yokom, 17, from Napier, Ill., wowed the room with her powerful version of Burton Lane and Alan Jay Lerner's "What Did I Have That I Don't Have?" She thanked Feinstein for the Big Apple trip — and vowed to return one day as a singer of classic pop songs.

"People ask me if this music will survive, and I answer that it never really went away," Feinstein said. "But it needs care and attention. It's a national treasure — and it touches our souls in the deepest way."