

Who could ask for anything more? 'Michael Feinstein's American Songbook' on TV

"Michael Feinstein's American Songbook" opens a tuneful door into America's songwriting past.

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In "Michael Feinstein's American Songbook," the singer and pianist shares his avocation as a collector of vintage recordings, sheet music and orchestral arrangements.

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On TV

'Michael Feinstein's American Songbook'

8 p.m. Oct. 6, 13 and 20, KCTS-9.

Decades ago, at the height of the glam-rock craze, I worked in a record store in England where we subsisted quite happily on a diet of Bryan Ferry and David Bowie every day.

Then one afternoon, someone put on something quieter. Nimble guitarwork served as backdrop to a voice that was timeless, serene and all-knowing:

I used to visit all the very gay places,

Those come-what-may places

Where one relaxes on the axis of the wheel of life

To get the feel of life in jazz and cocktails ...

Good grief. What *was* this?

The singer was Ella Fitzgerald, the guitarist Joe Pass, the song Billy Strayhorn's "Lush Life," and the album Ella's 1974 release "Take Love Easy."

It was my first clue that somewhere out there was a sophisticated American songwriting tradition that might well be worth investigating.

True, Ferry had recorded some of these tunes: "These Foolish Things," "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." But he'd done it in a campy way. Ella showed what polished gems they were; and she even, I later learned, organized them into handy "songbooks" that highlighted the glories of Cole Porter, George and Ira Gershwin, Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin and others.

Now singer Michael Feinstein is making *his* case for preserving this great songwriting canon, in a superb three-part series that debuts on PBS at 8 p.m. Wednesday. Filled with rare archival film clips and recordings, and presented with a true believer's fervent passion, the program highlights the link between popular music on the radio and tunes from films and stage shows in the first half of the 20th century. It also reveals the unusual role the U.S. military played in American popular song during World War II, and the way that the era's racial troubles were reflected in the music of the time, even while the songs' creators and performers often worked together regardless of color.

"Michael Feinstein's American Songbook" is also a funny, candid portrait of Feinstein himself on the road, in rehearsal and in a basement studio where he spends every spare moment transferring rare and fragile recordings into his digital archive for safekeeping.

As his partner in life and business, Terrence Flannery, notes, music is Feinstein's be-all and end-all. When the men first met, all Feinstein had in his living room was a 9-foot grand piano and some plastic chairs. Their home looks considerably more comfortable now. And Feinstein's busy concert schedule — more than 150 gigs a year, ranging from solo performances to appearances with small combos to full-fledged "Pops" concerts with various symphonies — looks like a well-oiled enterprise.

Feinstein stresses the need to preserve this music by playing it live. Still, if he had his druthers, he'd devote all his time and energy to collecting and preserving vintage recordings, sheet music and orchestral arrangements. When he shows you some of the gems he and his fellow collectors have turned up — a 70-year-old recording of George Gershwin singing "My Cousin in Milwaukee," some newly discovered lyrics to Irving Berlin's "There's No Business Like Show Business" — you can see why he'd rather spend every hour in his basement "transferring and taking care of things."

Director, producer and editor Amber Edwards has done a splendid job of giving these archival clips breathing room so you don't feel shortchanged by too brief a glimpse of a performance. Many songs are heard in their entirety, performed either by their originators or by Feinstein and his guest artists: Cheyenne Jackson, David Hyde Pierce and Marvin Hamlisch. And Feinstein's commentary on the evolution that popular-song delivery went through — the difference in the way that Frank Sinatra, say, handled Porter's "Night and Day" in 1943 versus 1961 — is artfully done.

The series stresses the role that Sinatra, Rosemary Clooney, Tony Bennett and numerous others played in bringing decades-old songs back to new, richer life in the 1950s — although, oddly, there's no mention of Ella (or Billie Holiday, for that matter). It also shows all the tricks Feinstein uses to rescue this material he loves. At a secondhand sale, as he scoops up sheet music by the armload, the vendor cautions him that they're \$3 each.

"I can handle it," Feinstein says, then lays down a bunch of \$50 bills before wheeling off his haul.

Another side of this rescue work involves musicians and songwriters he has befriended over the years who have left their archives to him. Other collectors also share their treasure troves with him. ("We are a peculiar bunch," one of them acknowledges.)

The loss of any of this material clearly drives Feinstein crazy. In the most memorable shot in the series, Feinstein stands next to the roaring traffic of I-405 in Los Angeles and explains that beneath its eight lanes are thousands of musical scores, dumped there as landfill by MGM in the 1960s.

"Valuable collections of music-related artifacts," he fumes, "have been destroyed because of the ignorance of people in charge."

Feinstein can't quite explain how he latched onto a songwriting era predating his birth when most of his contemporaries were tuned in to the Beatles.

"I was in my own little world," he says. "It was like learning a language as a kid that you never knew anybody was ever going to be able to speak."

But even as he worries about the disappearance of a tradition he reveres, he clearly delights in finding kindred souls who share his passion — and an audience that appreciates it.

Who wouldn't get excited a find like those newly discovered "No Business Like Show Business" lyrics:

Management complaining 'bout the grosses,

Censors telling you to keep it clean —

And the leading man who's blowing doses

Of halitosis in every scene.

Who could ask for anything more?

Yet there *is* more. A website filled with hundreds of more items from Feinstein's collection — music, film clips, images — goes live on Oct. 11 at www.michaelfeinstainsamericansongbook.org. And Mr. Feinstein himself, in the flesh, will bring his "Sinatra Project" to Benaroya Hall on Feb. 14, 2011 (see www.seattlesymphony.org for details).

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http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/thearts/2013030618_feinstein03.html