

Session Sensei

LIFE IS A CABARET

by Scott Healy, keyboardist with Conan O'Brien.

I like to think of cabaret as the dysfunctional cousin of Broadway. Musically, it draws heavily on the American songbook, show tunes, and Tin Pan Alley, but also diverges into pop, rock, world music, and of course, Broadway. A cabaret pianist is expected to know this vast repertoire, play all styles, follow a singer, transpose, come up with intros, interludes, and endings, create arrangements and charts, and go to way too many rehearsals. I don't do cabaret, but I knew of many gifted pianists who could do it in their sleep, and I've seen some of them in action.

Literally the day after I lost my TV gig [Conan O'Brien departed NBC after the network's *Tonight Show* flip-flop. —Ed.], I got called to do a three-night cabaret gig in

a small club in L.A. I took the gig right away, remembering the mantra "Say yes, think about it later." I had some time on my hands, so I knew I could put in the necessary woodshedding to pull it off. Plus, I love a challenge, and for the first time in years, I really needed the work.

A Cabaret show usually lasts about an hour, and the set depends entirely upon the muse and ever-changing whims of the singer. Some do a revue of different songs to show depth and chops, some do a retrospective of their careers, some go as far as inventing a one-man show around a theme, complete with scripts, lighting cues, video projections, and background vocals.

Typically it's you on a grand piano and

the singer in a gown (or suit) in a too-small room, a situation seemingly designed to make you sweat in front of the discerning crowd. The cabaret audience is a scary bunch: friends and exes of the singer, performers, Broadway aficionados, and moneyed patrons. There's a good chance that at least one person in the crowd worked with almost every composer, lyricist, and choreographer you're presenting that night. They've paid a heavy cover charge, and they want a polished and refined show — a far cry from blowing through some *Real Book* tunes in a jazz club. Everyone takes it very seriously, so you'd better be on your game.

As I write this, we open tonight in Hollywood. I'll let you know how it turns out. 

