

## Session Sensei IS IT MAGIC?

by Scott Healy, keyboardist for *The Tonight Show With Conan O'Brien*

I was once on a panel for auditions at a local college. One by one, the kids would hack away nervously while our group of crusty musicians furiously scribbled notes, nodded pensively, and occasionally looked up to offer forced smiles of encouragement. The only vocalist went last. She ambled up to the dais and announced that she would sing "My Funny Valentine." She didn't have music, but I knew the tune, so I offered to play it with her.

It was clear that amongst my esteemed colleagues, all possessing advanced degrees and résumés that make a guy like me wish he'd stuck with Chopin and Beethoven, clearly none of them had ever backed Aunt Emma at the local VFW. We went to the piano, I found a key for her, and we dove in. I played a short piano solo on the verse, and she came back in and finished up to a round of applause. As I sat

back down my chairman leaned over: "That was magical! I couldn't have done what you just did in a million years!"

It was Arthur C. Clarke who said, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," and with a wink to my fellow journeyman keyboardists, I always notice how the refined harmonic skills I gained on countless ratty bandstands give me that magician's edge. Maybe some of you have noticed that, too. But it's not magic, is it?

Cut to a week ago when as I was about to run up onstage on the *Tonight Show*. I was informed that the host would start singing "Danny Boy" later on, and that I was to find his key, slide in with suitable ad lib piano accompaniment, and follow wherever his comedy muse would take him. This is one of the things that I do, and the powers that be count on me

to be right on. I do my best to make it look easy.

On stage under the lights, as the host crooned his faux Irish tenor to a rousing and hilarious finish, I flashed to Aunt Emma and Uncle Louie at the VFW in New Jersey. I thought of how as a musician, experience is the best teacher, but the sum of our experiences and our presence in the moment is a greater asset. I'm glad I spent so many Saturday nights on the gig. It's not always easy to pay attention and take your performance seriously, especially under the wartime conditions of a less than ideal gig, but you're always sharpening magical skills like following (or leading) a meandering singer, transposing difficult changes, and thinking about form and harmony while you fake a song you barely know – all the while gaining experience that just might someday pay off. ☒

