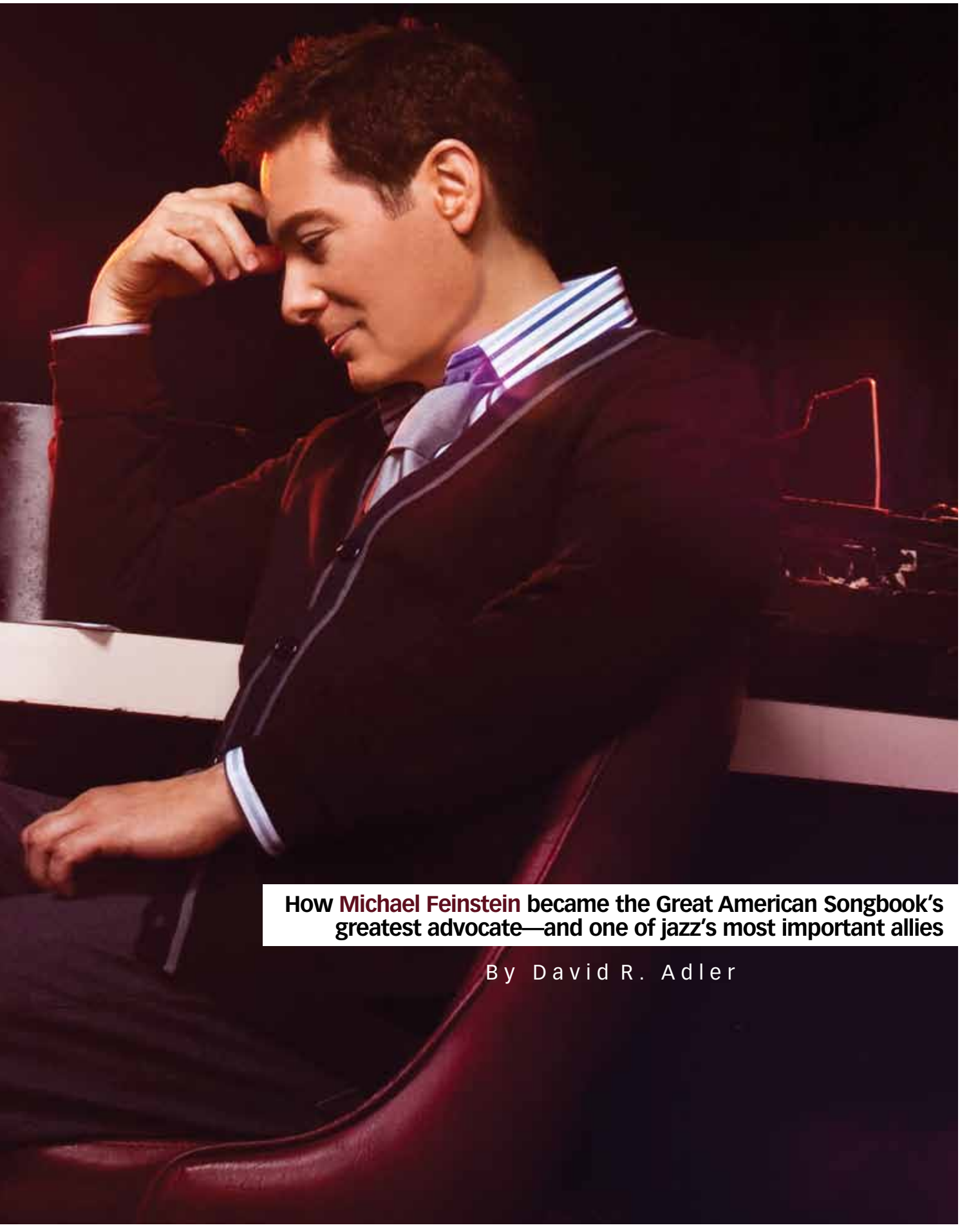
THE SONGBOOK KEEPER



How Michael Feinstein became the Great American Songbook's greatest advocate—and one of jazz's most important allies

By David R. Adler

"**I believe in reincarnation." With a mere four** words**,** Michael Feinstein says a lot about his life as a singer, pianist, collector, archivist and advocate-in-chief for the Great American Songbook. "Perhaps I came in with some sort of sense memory of what came before," he muses, seated on a couch in his eye-popping, 9,000-square-foot Manhattan townhouse. "From my earliest memories," he continues, "I'd find an old piece of sheet music and I'd study it, look at the art on the cover. I wanted to know the writers. I looked at the copyright date. I was interested in the verse of the song—people know the chorus of 'Pennies From Heaven,' I wanted to know the verse. It was as if I was being prepared for the career that was to come."

Although he seems to inhabit another era, Feinstein is plenty busy in the here and now. He's just returned from an afternoon rehearsal with his friend Barbara Cook, musical theater icon, a 2011 recipient of the Kennedy Center Honors. Ascending the stairs in jeans and a sport coat, he makes a calm but memorable entrance, cradling a rotund grey cat named Smokey. "He was crying for me," Feinstein says. "I need to give him some attention."

For the next hour, the Columbus, Ohio native, now 55, settles in and reflects on his recent projects, including an extraordinary work-in-progress: the Great American Songbook Archive and Museum, which opened in January 2011 in Carmel, Ind. This new institution, and Feinstein's career as a whole, prompts us to revisit the symbiotic relationship between songbook crooners and jazz artists—that is, between jazz and entertainment.

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If there's one thing more important to Feinstein than getting onstage and performing the decades-old songs he loves so much, it's educating new generations about this pillar of America's cultural heritage. And here again, Feinstein speaks of reincarnation. "I meet a lot of young people who are deeply moved and affected by these songs, for whatever reason," he says. "I believe there is a generation of people who have resonance with older music because it is in their soul on a deeper level."

It's more than passion, however, that makes Feinstein qualified to lead the charge on behalf of American popular song. In 1977, when he was just 20, he began a six-year gig as assistant to Ira Gershwin. "Ira was my mentor, my college education, my professor, who taught me a lot of what I know by demonstration, by introducing me to his contemporaries. I wonder what would have happened to my life if I hadn't met him." In time, Feinstein would become a walking encyclopedia on golden-age songwriters and 20th-century American entertainment.

"I know, it's shocking, isn't it?" says Barbara Cook of Feinstein's erudition. Bassist Jay Leonhart, a trusted Feinstein sideman, agrees: "It's hopeless. You just can't fool him. You don't even try. I've known Michael since he was a pipsqueak. The education he's given himself, it's like a double doctorate. And nobody told him, 'Alright, you're a doctor now, you don't need to study so hard anymore.' He just keeps going and going."

Jazz guitarist Joe Negri, who recorded *Fly Me to the Moon* with

Feinstein in 2010, reports: "Michael pulled these tunes out of the hat—I thought I was a pretty good student of the songbook, but boy, 'Blame My Absent-Minded Heart' [Cahn/Styne] I didn't know, 'A Mist Is Over the Moon' [Hammerstein/Oakland] I didn't know, and 'A Man and His Dream' [Burke/Monaco] I didn't know. His knowledge is amazing. I can't compare him to anybody."

Along with his authoritative Gershwin tributes, Feinstein has recorded albums honoring the work of Harry Warren, Hugh Martin, Jerry Herman, Burton Lane, Jule Styne, Jimmy Webb and more. On his 2008 release *The Sinatra Project*, he took the curious step of including songs that Sinatra never actually sang. His October release, *The Sinatra Project, Vol. II: The Good Life* (Concord Jazz), follows a similar logic: "It's the Sinatra circle," Feinstein explains, "people he influenced and people who influenced him, songs that were being heard in that period. Music was more fluid then than it is now."

Bill Elliott's big-band arrangements swing plenty, and Feinstein, though not a jazz singer, brings a discerning touch to a piece of rare Ellingtonia, "C'est Comme Ça," from the doomed 1966 Broadway musical *Pousse-Café*. It's the kind of thing that separates Feinstein from countless "nu-crooners," to use a term coined by Nate Chinen in a 2005 article for *JazzTimes*. "Michael has a long lens on this whole process," says Jimmy Webb, an adoring friend, from his home in Long Island. "He's looking at music from a different perspective than the immediate clamoring marketplace." Feinstein, in other words, is an ally that the jazz world is lucky to have.

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It's late September, and Feinstein is set to perform at a benefit for Ronald McDonald House in the tony New York nightspot that bears his name, Feinstein's at Loews Regency. (Feinstein doesn't handle the booking.) Art Hirahara, one of the finest young jazz pianists on the scene, is playing a preshow set of standards with bassist Noriko Ueda. The well-heeled dinner crowd is listening, even applauding after solos. Vocalist Charenee Wade, first runner-up in the 2010 Monk competition, starts the show—a tribute to Frank Loesser—with a couple of tunes, backed by a house band that includes altoist Sharel Cassity, guitarist Matt Davis and drummer and DIVA Jazz Orchestra leader Sherrie Maricle. New York Pops Music Director Steven Reineke is the emcee.

Following an appearance by Broadway singer Ashley Brown (of *Mary Poppins* renown), Feinstein takes the stage with a prancing treatment of "Luck Be a Lady." Loesser's widow, Jo Sullivan Loesser, is in the house; later she joins Feinstein for a duet on Loesser and Hoagy Carmichael's "Two Sleepy People." After about 10 minutes, pianist Tedd Firth gets up to leave (heading to a gig at Birdland, Feinstein announces). But no matter: Feinstein moves over to the bench and handles the rest himself, including the ballad "I Wish I Didn't Love You So" and the uproarious novelties "I Love a Piano" (Irving Berlin) and "Lydia the Tattooed Lady" (Harold Arlen/Yip Harburg).

Feinstein is a fish in water onstage, but face-to-face he's proper and reserved, weighing and enunciating every word. "He's so soft-spoken and serious, and he looks you directly in the eye, and you think, 'Oh, my God, I hope I say the right thing,'" confides singer and actor Cheyenne Jackson of *30 Rock* and *Glee* fame. He and Feinstein made an album together called *The Power of Two* in 2009. "At first I was a little apprehensive," Jackson says, "because I'm this big, kind of loud guy, and I don't want to break any of the nice things in [Michael's] house. He has this impeccable demeanor. But he's totally irreverent and smart and fun."

He's also a man of strong opinions. When talk turns to the intermingled history of jazz and popular song, he leaps: "[Ken Burns] didn't mention one songwriter, not one, in a 10-hour show." Addressing these blind spots is one of Feinstein's tasks as director of Jazz at Lincoln Center's new Jazz & Popular Song Series. "For many years there have been two camps," he says, "and it seems that promoters treat these groups as two separate audiences, jazz and American popular song. No one's really considered the crossover nature of the two, by virtue of the fact that they survive because of each other." Thus far the series has featured such singers as Allan Harris, Curtis Stigers and Leslie Uggams.

"Listening to the work of Nelson Riddle or Billy May or Neal Hefti or Ernie Freeman or Mort Lindsey or dozens of others," Feinstein observes, "they all incorporate jazz in their arrangements for pop vocalists. And there are people who say, 'I don't like jazz.' OK, do you like Rosemary Clooney's *Rosie Solves the Swingin' Riddle* [1961]? And they say, 'Oh, yeah, I love that.' Well then you're listening to Harry 'Sweets' Edison. You're listening to all these jazz solos. Jazz is a part of those recordings even though people don't know it."

Some of Feinstein's own efforts veer closer to jazz, at least in terms of instrumentation: the Sinatra albums, the disc with Cheyenne Jackson and certainly *Fly Me to the Moon*, which led to an appearance at the 2011 Newport Jazz Festival (where Wynton Marsalis sat in).

"Before Feinstein's [at Loews Regency], the last time I played a nightclub was 15 years before that. And yet people call me a cabaret entertainer. I think it's misinformation."

"When I did *Isn't It Romantic* [1988], the first record I did with an orchestra, Johnny Mandel arranged and conducted it. He was retired at that point, but somehow I convinced him. When I recorded 'Girl Talk' with Maynard Ferguson [for *Big City Rhythms* 1999], Neal Hefti came to the session. I wanted his approval. I care about these people."

"People talk about the 'resurgence,' the 'popularity' of standards—I don't see it that way because I've been doing this all along."

Feinstein also cared about the great George Shearing, with whom he made the vocal-piano duo album *Hopeless Romantics*, recorded in 2002 and released in 2005. "George loved songs, he loved popular music, he loved lyrics particularly," Feinstein recalls. "We finally had the opportunity to record, and George was approaching his final years, his memory was fading, yet his creativity was as great as it ever was—so much so that he'd change keys or do things that were completely unexpected and I just went with him. On something like 'September in the Rain,' there are pauses especially in the bridge [*begins singing, 'To every word …'*], spots where I just stop and he stops with me. He phrased with me exactly, in the most unexpected places."

A proficient pianist as well, Feinstein rues that his playing "is not nearly as facile as it was. I still can play extemporaneously to a certain degree, but I can't play jazz. I'm smart enough to know that I can't play jazz." This raises the question of what, exactly, to call Feinstein. In *A Biographical Guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers*, Will Friedwald sounds an uncertain note, holding that Feinstein is neither a traditional cabaret singer nor a band singer in the Sinatra-Bing Crosby mold. (Incidentally, Friedwald donated a large collection of 78s to Feinstein's archive and museum.) For his part, Feinstein takes exception to the term "cabaret," given that he performs mainly in concert halls. "Before Feinstein's, the last time I played a nightclub was 15 years before that. And yet people call me a cabaret entertainer. I think it's misinformation."

Perhaps Feinstein is a "fusion" artist in the pre-rock sense outlined by Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux in their recent tome *Jazz*. That is, after all, how they situate the late Rosemary Clooney, one of Feinstein's most important mentors and friends. Feinstein's own view is probably as it should be: "I never think about classification," he says. Switching back to archivist mode, he adds, "Even the music I perform is evolving. There still are thousands of older songs that are unknown. I look at the catalog of Johnny Green and I think, oh, my God, there are 50 published songs by Johnny Green, and then I know his unpublished songs. I focus on that material because I figure when I'm gone, there'll be less of a chance of some of that stuff being heard."

Only One Life, Feinstein's 2003 homage to Jimmy Webb, is an anomaly in that it focuses on a songwriter who rose to fame in the rock era. "Jimmy to me is a link from classical American popular song to contemporary," Feinstein argues. (Maria Schneider hailed Webb as a genius in a 2006 interview with Ben Ratliff.) Webb coproduced the album—which features orchestrations by Alan Broadbent—and undertook a two-piano tour with Feinstein after its release.

"It was like getting a blue ribbon at the county fair," says Webb on getting the Feinstein treatment. "[*Only One Life*] joins a very exclusive little club of records that Michael has devoted to composers. I'm not sure I belong in that company but I'll take it, I'll grab it with both hands. I do hope that my music has a place in history and that people come back and listen in a historical perspective. … Certainly Michael has put me in a place where I could be referenced in that way."

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At the moment, Feinstein's museum holds just a fraction of what is being planned. Its home is in the Palladium, the focal point of the Center for the Performing Arts, a new facility in Carmel that also donates office space to the Michael Feinstein Foundation for the Preservation of the Great American Songbook. "One of the most watched and admired plans for urban living in recent times" is how Feinstein speaks of Carmel, just north of Indianapolis, with a population of 80,000. His museum aspires to do for the songbook, and the city, what the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (Cleveland), the Country Music Hall of Fame (Nashville), the Experience Music Project (Seattle) and the Musical Instrument Museum (Phoenix) have done for their respective fields. *Michael Feinstein: The Sinatra Legacy*, a PBS concert special that aired in August 2011, was filmed at the Palladium. (In October 2010, PBS aired the three-part documentary *Michael Feinstein's American Songbook*.) *We Dreamed These Days*, Feinstein's 2011 recording with the Carmel Symphony Orchestra, also documents his growing attachment to the Carmel venue.

Education is at the heart of all this: Feinstein ticks off a list of "master classes, competitions and challenges, that sort of thing. We've already had two major festivals with high school kids and we're planning another one next year. This is what I call the 'anti-*American Idol*.' That show is very detrimental on many levels. It's exclusionary. [There's no place] for kids who are interested in jazz, or Broadway, or

opera, or instrumentalists. There are so many other types of music that are part of the fabric of our country. But it's the negativity of the show that I hate the most. The fact that Simon Cowell humiliates people and then young kids learn that it's OK to do that." (Cowell left *American Idol* in 2010 and is now a judge on Fox's *The X Factor*.)

The museum also has an online component, so that "somebody 15 has access to material that would have been so wonderful for me at that age. Now it's possible to go online and learn about anyone from Ethel Waters to Buddy Clark, or Willard Robison, or an obscure songwriter like Sydney Shaw, who wrote 'Evil Spelled Backwards Means Live.' You name it. The thing I like about now is the possibilities of technology, even though there's also the problem of misinformation and things like Wikipedia, which I think is almost as bad as *American Idol*. Wikipedia once said that I married Kim Cattrall and it was picked up and announced on *Entertainment Tonight*." (Feinstein married his partner, Terrence Flannery, in Los Angeles in 2008.)

Aside from high school kids, Feinstein has a way, too, of educating the professionals in his midst. At press time, the 36-year-old Cheyenne Jackson was prepping for his first solo show at Carnegie Hall, and Feinstein's influence in picking repertoire was decisive. "I approach that style of music with so much more care now," Jackson says. "There's more that goes into it, because I know there can be more. You can make it a much deeper experience than just a standard that you've heard a million times. That's what I've learned from Michael." Even the legendary Barbara Cook looks to Feinstein for a bit of guidance. "Sometimes he knows two songs that will go together very well," she says, "and he'll help us put together a moment."

On the other hand, Jackson coaxed Feinstein out of his comfort zone with "The Power of Two," a song by the Indigo Girls. "The phrasing is completely different," Jackson observes, "and even just the timbre that you sing it in, the country kind of feel. What I love about Michael is that he's willing to do that. And he was nervous about it. But he's always willing to stretch himself musically, and that's why he's getting better and better. He's one of the few people whose voice gets better as he gets older. It's like he's aging backwards."

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There's little doubt that Feinstein, since debuting in the mid-'80s, has helped renew interest in standards as a commercially viable avenue for the record industry. This season brought Tony Bennett's *Duets II*, which puts the octogenarian with Lady Gaga, Amy Winehouse and a dozen others not known as jazz or standards singers. Throughout the '00s there was the spectacle of Rod Stewart releasing—here Feinstein completes my sentence—"all those horrible records." Yet there's no sense that Feinstein takes those records as an affront. "Rod Stewart is just one of many; I don't consider him a benchmark in any way. People talk about the 'resurgence,' the 'popularity' of standards—I don't see it that way because I've been doing this all along."

The late Gene Lees, in an essay titled "Jazz and the American Song," claimed unconvincingly that younger jazz musicians are becoming disconnected from standards. Lees also opined that "little new popular music of quality is being produced," but many young jazz musicians plainly disagree, as they've covered songs by Radiohead and Björk, or looked to hip-hop and electronica for inspiration, or even built parallel careers as pop singer-songwriters. Still, the Great American Songbook has hardly fallen into disfavor or disuse. "In jazz the lineage is more clearly defined and easier to continue," Feinstein avers, "because there are instrumentalists coming up who are clearly influenced by this or that. There's a respect for the tradition, even though there will always be critics like Leonard Feather, who hated traditional jazz and did immeasurable damage to certain aspects of jazz. However, there is a reverence for what came before, and a clear looking back as well as looking forward. With American popular music it's very different because there isn't that same lineage. It's harder because the world has changed so much that it's not possible for that music to be heard in the same way, or to have the same influence for succeeding generations."

Following that point, and in fairness to Lees, it could also be said that a young tenor saxophonist will never have the visceral connection to an old Tin Pan Alley song that, say, Sonny Rollins does. But what if that player could develop deeper, poetic connections to his or her "reincarnated" self? Feinstein, in his way, suggests a model of engagement with sounds of the past. "Even when I was a child," he offers, "I had the peculiar awareness of mortality. Why, I can't tell you. I looked at an old person and knew that that might be me one day. I never saw the separation of, 'That's an old person and I'm a young person.' It gave me the gift of appreciating older generations and the knowledge and information that they had." ***JT***

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