



Brad Connor and Ben Sears

Life is a Cabaret

For local life partners, it's no good sitting alone in their room, they make the music play!

For Ben Sears and Brad Connor, life really is a cabaret.

Life partners for 24 years and a performing duo for nearly as long, Sears and Connor are passionate about sharing with audiences the music of American composers from Jerome Kern to the Gershwins to Frank Loesser, and many more. But they also see themselves as historians, preservationists and custodians of the Great American Songbook.

Founding members of the Boston Association of Cabaret Artists (BACA), Sears and Connor, for nearly 15 years, have presented cabaret shows and revues devoted solely to the performance of American music through their "American Classics" series. Their latest show celebrates the 100th

anniversary of Irving Berlin's timeless song "Alexander's Ragtime Band," published on March 18, 1911. The show will feature other works by the renowned composer who wrote more than 1,000 songs, many now woven into the fabric of American life.

Joining Sears and Connor for this one-time-only performance on March 18 at Pickman Concert Hall in Boston's Longy School of Music is a supporting roster of talent from the Boston musical theater and cabaret community. Singers include Valerie Anastasio, Edward M. Barker, Leigh Barrett, Eric Bronner, Brian De Lorenzo, Kerry Dowling, Mary Ann Lanier, Peter Miller, Joci Perry and Heather Peterson. Serving as emcees for the

evening are JoAnne Dickinson and Bob Jolly.

Their regard for the history, sophistication and cultural significance of Berlin's work comes across immediately when talking with Sears and Connor, both considered experts in the field of popular American music.

"There's no better way to learn about an era than through its songs," says Sears who is currently editing "The Irving Berlin Reader" for publication in November 2011 by Oxford University Press. Not to be outdone, Connor is the editor for a forthcoming reissue of Alex Wilder's classic "American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950," featuring an updating of the Irving Berlin chapter, also for Oxford University Press in 2011. Frequent lecturers and commentators, they'll give lecture/recitals on "Alexander's Ragtime Band" for the Annual Conference of the Society for American Music on March 10 in Cincinnati, Ohio, and at the Leventhal-Sidman Jewish Community Center in Newton on March 30.

But the March 18 show won't be an academic exercise, it will be about music and lots of fun. "The genius of Irving Berlin was how he used a catchy little phrase like 'Come on and hear ...' It plays in your head endlessly. He had fun with language," says Connor, a West Virginia native ("I moved away as fast as I could.") who is the duo's pianist.

"One of the most important parts of this for us is showcasing these lyrics," adds Sears, who grew up in Bedford, Mass. ("The Red Sox are in my blood"). Music has been an interest since childhood, he says, though he's had little formal training. "The melodies are terrific but lyrics were written for people who read, who knew politics," he says,

pointing out that songwriters such as Berlin and others of the era tackled subjects as topical and varied as the influenza epidemic, labor strikes and, of course, World War I in popular songs.

It was Sears's idea for the couple to perform together. "Ben wanted to do a show and he asked if I'd play piano and it took on a life of its own," says Connor.

But what distinguishes their cabaret performances and what they enjoy most is their passion for the origins and backgrounds of songs. "We try to find material that audiences don't usually hear," Sears says. "We've found obscure and unusual songs and that became our focus."

A decade ago, for example, Connor, after much hunting and legwork, pieced together the original musical score for the revue "The Band Wagon" by Howard Dietz, George S. Kaufman, and Arthur Schwartz. Best known as a Fred Astaire film, the show was first performed onstage in 1932, but it was never produced again, and much of the score was missing. In 2001, American Classics presented the first revival of "The Band Wagon" as part of the 2000-2001 Schwartz centenary. The production earned a special 2001 IRNE (Independent Reviewers of New England) Award for Musical Theatre.

Now Sears and Connor look forward to showcasing Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band" along with other songs written in a similar spirit of the times that, notes Sears, "caught the public imagination and never let go." [x]

"Alexander's Ragtime Band at 100"
Friday, March 18 at 7:30 p.m. at the Pickman Concert Hall of the Longy School of Music, 27 Garden Street, Cambridge.
Tickets are \$25 and \$20 students/seniors.
For tickets, contact American Classics at 617-254-1125 or ac@amclass.org.
For more information, visit www.amclass.org.