

LV MUSIC

Patience pays off for Michael Feinstein, who will celebrate the Judy Garland centennial at Zoellner Art Center

By L. Kent Wolgamott
Special to The Morning Call • Oct 20, 2022 at 12:31 pm



 Singer, pianist, and music revivalist Michael Feinstein will play Nov. 5 at Zoellner Arts Center. (Kevin Alvey)

Michael Feinstein has learned to be patient when it comes to touring the past couple of years. Like many musical artists, he saw plans go up in smoke because of the pandemic and is only now getting back to performing live.

“Some things have been postponed multiple times. I’ve learned firsthand to go with the flow and that things happen in the way they’re supposed to,” Feinstein said by phone. “It’s made me very Zen.”

The routine is much the same in the lead-up to his shows.

“I really don’t put together a set list until just before I’m going to perform,” he said. “It has to do with how I’m feeling at that time and what I feel should be performed that night.”

Fans who see Feinstein this fall will likely hear him celebrate the Judy Garland centennial and sing selections from “Gershwin Country,” the album on which he duets with country artists.

He will play 7:30 p.m. Nov 5 at Lehigh University’s Zoellner Arts Center .

“Obviously, I’ll be doing them solo — along with some ‘standards’ associated with me,” he said. “Some of the songs will be vintage Michael Feinstein.”



Michael Feinstein is an expert on The Great American Songbook, and expert at performing its music. (Courtesy of Virginia Arts Festival)

“Gershwin Country,” which was recorded in 2019 but held for release until March of this year, brings the Ambassador of the Great American Songbook to Music City, paired with the likes of Rosanne Cash, Lyle Lovett, Allison Krauss, and Lee Ann Womack on songs by George and Ira Gershwin.

“That was the idea, to try and bring together two great traditions,” Feinstein said. “I just got an inspiration that the Gershwin songs are great stories in the lyrics and country is the last stronghold of singers doing songs that tell stories.

“When I’d tell people about it, they looked at me like I was ready for the loony bin,” he said. “After it was finished, everybody got it. It turned out exactly as I had hoped. The end result is great singers doing great classics.”

The arrangements of songs are distinctly country, including “Someone to Watch Over Me,” sung with Krauss; “I Got Rhythm,” with Paisley; and “Soon,” with Womack, the album’s standout — “I’m glad you said that,” Feinstein said. “That’s not one of the best-known songs. But it might be my favorite.”

Country or otherwise, Feinstein’s choice of material to perform will feature plenty of songs that, over the last century, have become enduring classics.

“The craft of the songs are timeless, just as Shakespeare is timeless, or listening to Beethoven’s Ninth or seeing a Da Vinci drawing,” Feinstein said. “They’re all art that transcends the ages. I believe these songs, standards, have that resonance today.”



Michael Feinstein as he conducts the Pasadena POPS. (Courtesy of Pasadena Symphony and POPS)

Feinstein, 65, was drawn to the Great American Songbook for as long as he can remember. His older brother and sister listened to pop while they were growing up in Ohio. But not little Michael.

“It was these songs that appealed to me as a child,” he said. “At 5 years old, I started picking them out on piano. It’s the music I love, that has stayed with me for my whole life. ... It’s gratifying to be able to sing them for multiple generations.”

A musical anthropologist and the most acclaimed interpreter of the Great American Songbook, Feinstein worked extensively with Ira Gershwin — including creating an archive of his work and that of his brother. Feinstein is a member of the National Recording Preservation Board, dedicated to preserving America’s musical treasures and founded the Great American Songbook Foundation.

That foundation, Feinstein said, not only preserves and researches the songbook, but through its camps and scholarship programs, is bringing a new generation of singers to follow in Feinstein’s footsteps.

His concerts this summer will, of course, showcase his ability to sing the timeless classics so effortlessly.

“It comes from a deep connection with the songs themselves, with experience having performed them for years,” Feinstein said. “It’s storytelling, it’s acting. It’s the most natural thing. I’ve done it for so many years. I’m happy I get to keep doing it.”

L. Kent Wolgamott is a freelancer for The Morning Call

Michael Feinstein live

When: 7:30 p.m. Nov. 5

Where: Zoellner Arts Center, Bethlehem

How much: Starting at \$35

Tickets and info: zoellner.cas.lehigh.edu/