

The St. Louis Cabaret Conference

The Last Three Years

By **Chuck Lavazzi**



Tim Schall is a very busy man these days.

The St. Louis-based cabaret artist and voice coach started 2009 by producing professional development workshops in Washington, D.C. and Las Vegas.

In May, he premiered his latest show,

Classic Cole—which focused on Cole Porter—while simultaneously teaching an advanced cabaret class that culminated in a public performance shortly thereafter. Also in May was the first edition of *The Cabaret Party*—an informal, late-night session where performers try out new material. On his schedule is a reprise of the Porter show along with trips to Chicago, Boston, and Santa Fe.

And then there's the St. Louis Cabaret Conference.

Tim and then-St. Louisan (now New Yorker) Sharon Hunter initiated the conference in 2006 by importing New York cabaret powerhouses Lina Koutrakos and Rick Jensen to facilitate the first sessions. In the ensuing three years it has grown like the proverbial Topsy.

"The first year," Tim recalls, "we had two faculty members and thirteen singers. Since then, the pro-

**At left
Participants and faculty
from the first St. Louis
Cabaret Convention
in August 2006**

St. Louis Cabaret Conference

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seven other singers make their solo debuts, with more scheduled for the fall and winter. Just down the block at The Jazz Bistro, solo acts and cabaret showcases are beginning to pop up in a season formerly given over entirely to jazz. Meanwhile, in the “inner ring” suburb of Maplewood, the Black Cat Theatre hosts a performance series that includes cabaret in its mix of music acts.

If the number of venues hosting cabaret shows has increased in the last three years, so has the number of organizations producing them. When the first conference was being planned in 2006, the only group producing a full season was the Grand Center Cabaret, which booked established national talent for the Sheldon Concert Hall—a venue as famous for its uncomfortable seats as for its excellent acoustics. Now, there are a number of local cabaret production companies, only one of which—Cabaret St. Louis—relies entirely on out-of-town talent. The rest concentrate on presenting and promoting local performers at multiple venues, from the somewhat cavernous Savoy Ballroom on the top floor of the Sheldon to the cozy and congenial confines of the Kranzberg Center. This summer, cabaret, like June, is busting out all over.

It’s probably no coincidence that most of the performers at these shows are conference graduates. It would not be much of an exaggeration, in fact, to suggest that the only conference veterans who haven’t already launched solo shows are those who are still (to quote a Sondheim lyric) “putting it together”—including the author of this article. That’s probably because, as noted music director and conference faculty member Alex Rybeck recalls, conference sessions are filled with memorable performance breakthroughs.

According to Alex, “Every day of each session brings about a procession of such moments. Someone discovers that by transposing

a song, it’s easier to sing and communicate; someone discovers they have permission to phrase a lyric differently than the way they heard it initially; someone gets past their pre-occupation with ‘singing’ and taps into a deep emotion they didn’t know was underneath the lyrics; someone discovers ‘they are

 The greatest gift we can give one another is hope and infinite possibilities to expand our lives. The fact that everything asked of me was possible—I DID IT! I wanted to do this type of thing all my life and—I DID IT! You are dream-catchers! You made my dream come true. 

enough’—that they don’t have to be Frank Sinatra or Barbra Streisand, but that they alone have something personal and therefore valuable and interesting to share. It is always thrilling for me to watch the ‘light bulbs’ go off with each participant, and it happens to different people at different moments with different issues. For me, those personal breakthroughs are what it’s all about, and it never gets old.”

As Tim recalls, those light bulbs have been going off from the very beginning. At that first conference, “eleven singers, in addition to me and Sharon, signed up. Sharon and I had worked at the Yale Conference with Lina and Rick, so we knew that it was going to be a first-rate experience, but the others didn’t know exactly what they were in for. Within the first hour, I could feel that all of the singers were completely absorbed in the

work...the St. Louis Cabaret Conference has built a real community of performers who are committed to doing cabaret honestly and with skill."

But how did Tim become involved in cabaret to begin with? "Like many cabaret performers, I come from a theater background. I started watching great performers like Barbara Cook, Andrea Marcovicci, Amanda McBroom, and Ann Hampton Callaway come through St. Louis. I fell in love with it mostly because of the emotional directness and immediacy of the performances."

In fact, it was through those performances that Tim met Alex Rybeck. "I learned a ton from Alex when he music-directed my first show, and that helped me get accepted into the first group at the Cabaret Conference at Yale. The whole experience that Erv Raible put together at Yale really made a lasting impact on me. So I came back to town and started producing my own shows at several different venues. None of them really traditional cabaret rooms, but I made it happen wherever I could—theaters, restaurants, etc.

"I felt like a bit of a lone wolf out there for a while, but then Lina called and everything started to shift here! The conference has really changed things for singers in St. Louis. And we also have some wonderful venues. We're lucky in that regard."

The 2009 St. Louis Cabaret Conference will run August 13 through 16, with four full days of workshops and four nights of public performances, including an alumni showcase, a new show by Tim, a faculty showcase starring Lina Koutrakos, Jason Graae (returning for his second year), Alex Rybeck, and Rick Jensen, and the final participants' showcase in which the dreams caught in the workshops will be fully realized. Participants don't have to

live in St. Louis to take part in the workshop. Singers have come from Chicago, Boston, Palm Springs, and Seattle.

If participants can't come to St. Louis, never fear, Tim, Lina, and Rick teamed up after the first workshop and developed the three-day Performance Connection workshops for singers around the country. They have been to Boston, Santa Fe, Washington, D.C., Binghamton, NY, and Las Vegas. They plan a return visit to Chicago this August, with "some new cities in the planning stage."

"We fly into town on a Thursday," Lina states. "Then we meet the singers for the first time on Friday morning. You can't sing or express yourselves in an effective way without your 'life' being a big part of it, so by the time the weekend is over, I am privy to a lot of talent and humanity!" "I am amazed and so grateful that this very special and unique way of communicating is now becoming more com-

monplace outside the clubs and performance venues," muses Rick Jensen. "It is so refreshing.

My times in these cities teaching and having this experience are becoming my most satisfying moments in my artistic life."

In ours too, Rick. ○



**From 2007 Conference
(Front) Amanda McBroom
Lina Koutrakos
Tim Schall
(Back) Rick Jensen
Alex Rybeck**

Editor's Note:

For more information on the St. Louis Cabaret Conference, write totschall@sbcglobal.net. For more information on the Performance Connection workshops held around the country, visit www.performanceconnection.net.