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MUSIC

## MUSIC; An Entertainer, Unapologetically

By BARRY SINGER

CLAIBORNE CARY has nothing to apologize for. In an age of cabaret performance often practiced as some rarefied art form, she is unabashedly an entertainer, one who likes to raise a ruckus.

Rude jokes and raw schtick are in no way beneath her, and as a singer Ms. Cary, now in her 60's, flat out likes to swing. All of which leaves her on the contrarian fringe of today's cabaret universe, where the notion of entertainment seems to get shunned somehow as lacking in serious purpose.

"It can get lonely," said Ms. Cary, who is in the midst of a monthlong return engagement at the somewhat less than mainstream Danny's Skylight Room on West 46th Street in Manhattan. "There aren't many people who aspire to be fun anymore. Not in a serious way."

A two-time winner of New York cabaret scene's top honor, the MAC Award, Ms. Cary is still a favorite within the industry but a name popularly recognized only by a few. Since arriving in New York from Lone Tree, Iowa in the 1950's as an aspiring dancer, she says has most definitely "been around": singing and dancing on Broadway and off and working the great cafes -- and also the not so great -- of the city.

Barely more than five-feet tall, she nursed little hope initially of making it as a Broadway chorus girl. Yet the choreographer Bob Fosse cast Ms. Carey in 1957 for his new show "New Girl in Town" over the vehement objections of that production's director, George Abbot.

"They were running up and down the aisle of the 46th Street Theater, screaming at each other," Ms. Cary recalled recently over lunch at a restaurant on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. "Abbot wanted another long-legged lady, but Bobby wanted me."

With characteristic capriciousness, however, Ms. Carey quit dancing for good immediately after "New Girl in Town" closed. "I just didn't want to be in the chorus anymore," she said. "I started doing parts and singing; I'd always listened to singers, especially Peggy Lee. Also Lee Wiley. And Anita O'Day."

At first there were gigs at tony Manhattan nightspots like the Blue Angel and Julius Monk's Upstairs at the Downstairs. Then came rock-and-roll and the near-death of cabaret in the 60's, followed by voice-over work, commercials and television, as well as two marriages and a son. Finally, some 10 years ago, Ms. Cary abandoned the city for Los Angeles. "A nasty little town," is all she will say about her

experience there. Her long-planned, permanent return to New York is now imminent.

Onstage, she remains an extraordinary amalgam of musicianship and standup comedy: her pitch sure, her sense of time, both musically and comedically, effortless. Though her voice possesses the razorblade tone and ironic attack of an Elaine Stritch, her singing can be surprisingly expansive, even lyrical.

She shapes her sets into melodramatic narratives with well-chosen song juxtapositions: Irving Berlin's "Say It Isn't So" opposite John Wallowitch's "I Live Alone Again"; Cy Coleman and Joe McCarthy's "Why Try to Change Me Now" sung against Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler's "As Long as I Live." The potential effect could be bathetic but rarely is; Ms. Cary's wit and sense of survival bend the songs to her will.

"I cut right to the bone," she said. "I've learned that I'm better being funny between songs, rather than just doing funny songs; funny songs quickly get not so funny. Maybe that's another reason I'm nowhere, though, professionally. I'm trying to swing and be funny. Who else ever managed that?"

On her latest CD, "Claiborne Cary Live," she leads off tackling George and Ira Gershwin's "The Man I Love" at a ferocious clip. The result is not just exhilarating but revelatory. "I used to sing all of these songs much more slowly," Ms. Cary tells her audiences. "But I had more time then."

"How do I exist?" she asks. "Or, at least, subsist? I play a lot of private parties. And I don't work much. That helps."

Her point is well taken. With few club owners these days paying performers anything at all beyond a small percentage of the door, the hard costs of cabaret -- salaries for musicians, up-front expenditures for arrangements and advertising -- largely come out of the singers' own pockets.

"You've got to save up for these gigs," Ms. Cary said wearily. "Let's face it, if I was looking to make a decent living, I'd have gone into computers by now."

Cabaret's persistent inability to provide her with financial security would surprise at least one person, Ms. Cary maintains.

"My mother viewed show business as a sure guarantee of economic freedom for her three daughters, both from the Depression and from men. (One of Ms. Cary's sisters is the actress Cloris Leachman.)

" 'Maybe you'll have your own money someday,' Mother would constantly say," Ms. Cary recalled. " 'Maybe you won't have to get married; maybe you'll just read and travel.' She'd call us in to watch her scrub the floor. 'Girls, come here and look,' she'd say. 'Don't ever do this.' "

"And," Ms. Cary added with the impeccable timing of a lifelong entertainer, "I never have."

Photo: Claiborne Cary singing at Danny's Skylight Room, a Manhattan club, in June. (Ebet Roberts)

