



### **Neo-crooner Lorenson shines in Rrazz debut**

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by Chad Jones, S.F. Theater Examiner

Keep your eyes and ears open for Russ Lorenson's next show.

If you care about quality cabaret – the elusive art that lives in a specific region where pop, jazz and theater intersect – you'll care about Lorenson, a local singer making his way steadily through the best rooms in the country.

Lorenson made his official Rrazz Room debut Sunday night in a show called "Standard Time" which attempts to demonstrate that the Great American Songbook did not stop being written in 1959. Lorenson contends that great songs in the standard style are still being written, and that's why his set list concentrates on tunes written in the last 20 years or so.

In a white shirt, black vest and jaunty fedora, Lorenson opened the show with Andrew Lippa's "Raise the Roof" (from the off-Broadway musical "The Wild Party") and proceeded to, well, raise the roof a little.

You could say Lorenson is part of the neo-croonerism pack that includes Harry Connick Jr., Michael Buble, Jamie Cullum and Peter Cincotti. He cares about being cool and suave and sexy in his vocal stylings, but unlike a lot of the pack, he's not interested in aping King Crooner Frank Sinatra.

If anything, Lorenson is more Tony Bennett (to whom he has paid tribute in a previous show) with his smooth, muscular voice. Where Bennett often tries to crack the sky with his belt, Lorenson is more sensitive and supple in regulating the power of his voice.

In a generous set of 19 tunes, Lorenson uncovered some real treasures to prove his point that great songs are still in ample supply. Ronny Whyte and Francesca Blumenthal's "The Party Upstairs" is a sharp examination of loneliness that ends with a clever, hopeful twist, while Tony Desare and Mike Lee's "How I Will Say I Love You" is pure, heart-melting romance. Another sweetly romantic tune is Chris Rice's "When Did You Fall?" about friends turning that tricky corner and becoming lovers.

A fair portion of the set list, entertaining as it is, has a sameness to it. The songs have that pleasant finger-snapping vibe that's pleasant, but the songs themselves are fairly stock romantic stuff. The one exception is Michael Garin's comedy number "My Hand," a raunchy ode to onanism.

But even the more ordinary songs are elevated by Lorenson's extraordinary quartet. Music director/pianist Kelly Park provides all the arrangements, and they are gorgeous. As a pianist, Park has romance in his fingers, and his work, especially on Peter and Cynthia Cincotti's "I Changed the Rules," is stellar. As a songwriter, Park provides some charming songs as well: "Fools in Love," which he wrote in high school (and is the show's oldest song), and "Diamond in the Sky," a variation on "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" written for his daughter.

Brian Carmody provides a sturdy drum foundation, and Tom Hubbard gives a master class in the musicality of the bass. And Terrence Brewer on a plugged-in guitar lends the quartet a distinctive sound that's part 1950s and part now. His playing is stunning, and his duet with Lorenson on Maury Yeston's "Danglin'" is a set highlight.

Special guest Andrea Marcovicci, whose own show, "Marcovicci Sings Movies II," opens Tuesday, Oct. 14 and runs through Nov. 2 on the Rrazz stage, stopped by to lend a little star power and congratulate Lorenson, a former student at "cabaret camp." She sang "Two for the Road" and got off the evening's best line as she observed an elderly woman in the front row enjoying a cocktail: "I like to see people of a certain age drinking."

The charming Lorenson could stand to talk a little more to his audience, and he would also do well to throw in a few familiar tunes, which help the audience relax into the music and give Lorenson to show off his ability to put a personal stamp on something we already know.

In this showcase of newer tunes, Lorenson saved the best for last. His encore number is a very new song. Inspired by the title of a comedy song written by Ronny Graham for "New Faces of 1952," Lorenson and Park took the title, "It's Raining Memories," and wrote a whole new song – a gorgeous song with texture and emotion and no veneer of cool.