



## Feinstein, Michael (b. 1956)

by Linda Rapp

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Michael Feinstein.  
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American pianist and singer Michael Feinstein has had a lifelong fascination with the popular music of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. He cites Al Jolson and Bing Crosby as his earliest musical influences, but among the most important were George and Ira Gershwin. An avid collector of their recordings since he was a boy, Feinstein became an archivist for Ira Gershwin, in which capacity he was able to study rare recordings and unpublished material by the Gershwins.

A popular performer in clubs and on the concert tour, Feinstein has also put out twenty albums, two of which were nominated for Grammy awards.

Feinstein was born in Columbus, Ohio--"not exactly a hotbed of musical activity, especially for . . . show music," as he admits--on September 7, 1956, already well after the heyday of the songwriters that he would come to admire.

Music was a part of Feinstein's life from his earliest days. His father, Edward Feinstein, a meat salesman by trade, was a member of the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America and took his young son along to the meetings. His mother, Florence Mae Cohen Feinstein, an amateur tap dancer, shared his father's "great passion for music," according to Feinstein.

When Feinstein was five, his parents bought a spinet piano. The boy took to it immediately, playing songs by ear. His parents signed him up for music lessons, but he continued to play by ear, imitating what he heard his teacher play. The music lessons were soon abandoned, but Feinstein's fascination with the piano continued, and he became a self-taught musician. He did not learn to read music until he was in his twenties.

Growing up, Feinstein was a rather solitary child. His passion was music, and his musical tastes were distinctly different from those of most of his schoolmates. Intrigued by his parents' old 78-rpm records, he soon began his own collection, going to second-hand stores to buy records by such artists as Al Jolson and Bing Crosby.

At fifteen he saw a televised movie about the life of George Gershwin. Deeply moved by Gershwin's music, he began scouring the city's thrift stores in search of recordings of his works and books about him.

In high school Feinstein was a member of the choir and the drama club. In his senior year he was voted the best actor in the school.

Never a particularly avid student, Feinstein decided to forego college but did not have a specific career plan. He had already been entertaining at weddings and bar mitzvahs, and now began to play at clubs as well. He also worked briefly as an accompanist for dance classes at Ohio State University.

When his father received a promotion and transfer to California, Feinstein decided to move there too. He

took a job at a piano store, where he proved to be excellent at demonstrating the instruments, but, in his own words, he was "a lousy salesman."

It was Feinstein's passion for collecting old records that led to an important job opportunity. In a Hollywood record shop, he bought some rare acetate recordings by Oscar Levant, a pianist who had been a close friend of George Gershwin and recorded many of his songs. The shopkeeper told Feinstein that the recordings had come from Levant's estate. Curious about the circumstances of their sale, Feinstein arranged a meeting with the pianist's widow, June Levant.

Levant discovered that the recordings had been included in the estate sale by mistake, and, impressed with Feinstein's knowledge of her husband's career and works, asked him to help her catalog his record collection. In lieu of payment for his work, Feinstein asked Levant to introduce him to Ira Gershwin.

Gershwin, by that time aged and in ill health, received few visitors, but Levant succeeded in arranging for Feinstein to meet him. Once again, Feinstein's extensive knowledge of the music of the era served him. Gershwin was struck by the young man's interest and quickly hired him as an archivist. He worked for Gershwin from 1977 to 1983.

In Gershwin's house, Feinstein found a treasure trove of musical documents--not only commercially-released records and sheet music but also privately-recorded material and unpublished scores and lyrics. Feinstein catalogued the collection--which grew as Gershwin and his wife acquired more materials at auctions--for eventual donation to the Gershwin Archives in the Library of Congress.

In 1982, when a number of musical manuscripts by George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and other contemporaries were discovered in a warehouse in Secaucus, New Jersey, Feinstein identified eighty-seven written by George Gershwin himself and personally delivered them to the Library of Congress.

While working for Ira Gershwin, Feinstein served as a consultant to the production of the musical *My One and Only* (1982), which was based on George and Ira Gershwin's *Funny Face* (1927-1928).

Feinstein was excited at the prospect of working on a Broadway show but soon became frustrated by the "clash of egos" that he encountered among those involved and by what he saw as a lack of authenticity in various musical selections and arrangements. Although Feinstein was not totally satisfied with the final version, the show, which premiered on Broadway in 1983, was a success.

Feinstein has described his six years with Gershwin as "having lived a dream." The experience was important to him professionally because he learned a great deal about the music and musicians of the Gershwins' era and also, through Gershwin, became acquainted with people in the entertainment industry. In addition, he developed a sincere friendship with Gershwin, whom he admired for his "gentleness of spirit" as well as his talent and knowledge.

Under the terms of Gershwin's will, Feinstein was made one of his literary executors, and so, after Gershwin's death in 1983, he remained at work on various projects, including a book of previously unpublished songs. To Feinstein's disappointment, this work came to a halt when the lyricist's widow, Leonore Gershwin, contested the will. Eventually they were able to come to terms, allowing Feinstein to continue the project.

In the meantime, Feinstein went back to performing in order to earn a living. During the previous six years, his entertaining had been limited to playing and singing at parties given by the Gershwins or their friends.

The contacts that he made there proved valuable. Liza Minnelli became a good friend and called upon him

to accompany her when she sang on *The Tonight Show*. This appearance led to other engagements, both at private parties and in clubs.

Critics praised his performances, citing his "personal intimacy" and "sensual involvement with the music." Gerald Nachman, a critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, called Feinstein "easily the best there is at what he does."

Feinstein's first album, *Pure Gershwin* (Parnassus Records), was released in 1985. He has since put out nineteen more, including two that received Grammy nominations, *Michael & George: Feinstein Sings Gershwin* (1998, Concord Jazz) and *Romance on Film / Romance on Broadway* (2000, Concord Jazz).

Feinstein has performed on a number of television shows including *Cybill*, *Thirtysomething*, and *Caroline in the City*, as well as in the movie *Get Bruce* (1999, directed by Andrew J. Kuehn), for which he wrote music.

In 1999 he fulfilled a long-held ambition when he opened his own club, Feinstein's, at the Regency Hotel in Manhattan, where he occasionally performs, although much of his time is taken up with concert tours, both in the United States and abroad.

Feinstein's talent has earned him invitations to play for Britain's late Queen Mother and for three American presidents. When he went to the White House during the Clinton administration, he brought a male date.

His appearance at a White House Valentine's gathering in 2006, where he played for a group that included right-wing politicians and new Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, raised eyebrows.

In response to an angry letter in *The Advocate* denouncing him for entertaining anti-gay politicians, Feinstein responded as follows: "My acceptance of the invitation was with the understanding that I would be bringing my partner of nine years. We were treated in every way as a couple, from both of our names on the invitations to having our photograph taken together with the President and First Lady. We introduced ourselves to other guests (both Republicans and Democrats) as life partners and were accepted without issue as a couple. . . . The White House belongs to all of us."

Feinstein has been open in acknowledging his homosexuality. He has worked with the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), and he wrote a song for the Equality Rocks concert that the HRC sponsored as part of the activities of the Millennium March for gay rights in May 2000. He cited the murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard as a motivation for his participation in the event.

[On October 17, 2008, Feinstein married his manager and partner of eleven years, Terrence Flannery, at their home in Los Angeles. Officiating at the ceremony were Judith Sheindlin (a former family court judge now seen on the *Judge Judy* television program) and Gabriel Ferrer, an Episcopal priest and the son of singer Rosemary Clooney.

Liza Minnelli and Barry Manilow sang at the wedding. Other friends in attendance included Lorna Luft, Joan Collins, Warren Beatty and Annette Bening, David Hyde Pierce, and Henry Winkler.]

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### **About the Author**

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