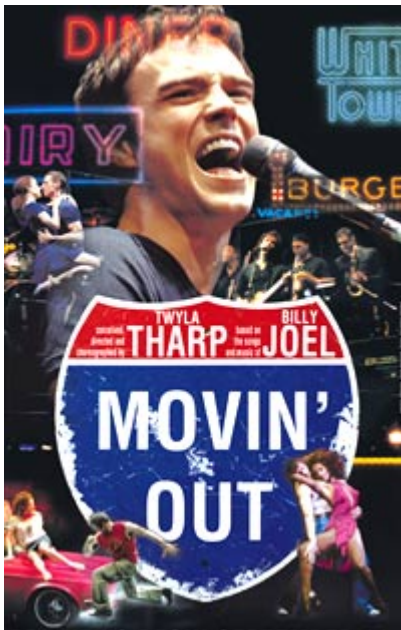


## **Michael Cavanaugh at Feinstein's: A New Piano Man**

March 22, 2007 Review by Jena Tesse



Lo, a miracle has occurred. At the hands of Michael Cavanaugh, the high-flying pianist/singer who sang all of Billy Joel's songs in *Movin' Out*, Feinstein's at the Regency was transformed. On a recent Monday night, in the middle of one of New York's swankiest hotels, an enthusiastic crowd of all ages sang along to songs by Elton John, the Beatles, Jerry Lee Lewis, and of course, Billy Joel.

It was certainly not what one would usually expect at Feinstein's. Jazz and showtunes, absolutely, but old-school rock is a rarity at such an upscale establishment. Not many kids are all that interested in jazz and traditional cabaret, and, ultimately, the younger audiences don't often get to enjoy the wonderful performers who regularly grace Feinstein's stage.

But when Cavanaugh sauntered out for his one-night-stand, the crowd covered a wide spectrum of ages, incomes, backgrounds and musical tastes. Sitting comfortably at the piano, Cavanaugh opened the evening with Billy Joel's "My Life," and at the second chorus, encouraged the crowd to sing along with him. And throughout the concert, he would continue that gentle encouragement ("If you want to sing along, please do."), bringing the audience to him and making them a part of the music and the show.

And as the show progressed, he not only requested vocal backups from the audience, but song suggestions, custom tailoring the concert to suit the taste of the crowd. Through such classics as "Still Rock n' Roll to Me," "Walking in Memphis," "Great Balls of Fire," "American Pie," "New York State of Mind" and other popular songs by classic rockers, he brought his own unique strengths to the standards, reinvigorating and revitalizing them as the audience sang happily along. Saxophonist John Scarpola (also from *Movin' Out*) joined Cavanaugh for several songs, nicely complimenting the *nouveau* piano man's work with his alternately bright and soulful brass work.

And as fun and enjoyable as the concert was, it was also somewhat poignant. For decades, jazz artists have freely interpreted the standards of their genre, each singer putting his or her unique stamp on each song. But with the exception of the occasional cover (which is usually not all that successful—remember Madonna's "Fever"?), rock songs generally remain bound to their originator, and reinterpretations are not often appreciated as an art form. It is quite exciting, then, to see a vibrant young artist put his own spin on some classic rock songs that are an important piece of contemporary American culture. These numbers have earned their place in our national songbook, and they deserve strong singers like Michael Cavanaugh to breathe new life into them and keep them alive for another generation to enjoy beyond CDs. May he return to Feinstein's soon.