

Broadway star for Broadway concert

Michael Feinstein will help O.C.'s Gay Men's Chorus celebrate five years.

By AIMEE GREENBERG
SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Crooner and musical anthropologist Michael Feinstein was a natural choice to headline the fifth- anniversary concert of Men Alive, the Orange County Gay Men's Chorus, on Saturday at the Irvine Barclay Theatre.

The two sold-out performances mark the first all-Broadway song-and-dance tribute for the 90-voice chorus. Feinstein first came to national attention in the late '80s with his one-man Broadway show "Isn't It Romantic: Michael Feinstein in Concert."

Feinstein plans on performing solos from contemporary Broadway favorites such as Sondheim's "No One Is Alone," from "Into the Woods." He joins the chorus for a medley of "Climb Every Mountain" interwoven with "You'll Never Walk Alone." Despite political overtones, the singer insists, "I'm not a political animal and music-making is my primary goal." He nonetheless delights in the opportunity to make music that primarily entertains, "while putting a different face on a lifestyle." The cabaret celebrity has sung with gay choruses in Dallas, Seattle and Cleveland.

Heralded as "the ambassador of the American song," (a title that Feinstein claims is "as

'Curtain Up! Light the Lights!'

• **With:** Michael Feinstein and Men Alive, the Orange County Gay Men's Chorus

• **Where:** Irvine Barclay Theatre, 4242 Campus Drive

• **When:** Saturday, 3 and 8 p.m.

• **Tickets:** Sold out

• **Call:** 949-854-4646

• **Online:** www.MenAliveChorus.org



Rich Cook

unwieldy and lofty as carrying a fireplace mantel around my neck!"), the four-time Grammy Award nominee has spent nearly three decades archiving and recording the works of composers of the Great American Songbook.

"I became a performer by default," Feinstein said from New York. "Classic songs don't survive unless they're performed. I loved the music so much, I was happy to share it."

Feinstein's foray into the world of musical excavation was prompted by a serendipitous meeting with Ira Gershwin in the 1970s. Gershwin hired Feinstein to catalog his vast record collection at his home in Beverly Hills. It was a six-year assignment that led to unearthing a musical gold mine, a legacy reflecting the combined genius of the Gershwin brothers.

"Working with Ira, I knew I was in the midst of something

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that would permanently mark the direction of my life," Feinstein said.

Artistic director Rich Cook founded Men Alive in 2001 after being inspired by a performance of the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles. According to Cook, gay choruses are resurrecting a dying art form made popular in the '40s by all-male choruses.

"Performing in the chorus is a redemptive act for those who may feel burdened by their sexual identity," says Cook.

Against a backdrop of spectacular visuals, including period dress and dance numbers, the chorus will orchestrate the Broadway story, from the Ziegfeld Follies to the present.

"Behind every great Broadway song is a story," says Cook, adding that the love affair between Broadway and the gay male is a phenomenon that

transcends all that glitters.

"It's deeper than a connection to the fabulous and more about the relationship to the underdog and issues of racial and sexual equality," Cook says. "Broadway musicals have made in-your-face statements about oppression since 'Showboat' in the 1920s."

Indeed, the stage has long served as a platform for marginalized voices, as in the Federal Theatre Project's Workers' Theatre Movement of the '30s, influenced in part by the agit-prop theater of Soviet communism. "Curtain up! Light the Lights!" struts its political plumage with songs such as "I Am What I Am," from "La Cage aux Folles":

"I am what I am. I'm my own special creation.

"Come take a look. Give me the hook or the ovation."

For Broadway aficionados interested in straight entertainment, the concert will showcase standard show tunes from hits such as "The Pajama Game" and "Sweet Charity."

Engaging Feinstein as special guest is in line with Men Alive's mission to reach out to the public at large. According to Stewart Hall, president and CEO, "Feinstein helps to legitimize our presence as an art element in Orange County, beyond the local gay community."

For Hall, Feinstein's persona coupled with his consummate knowledge as a music historian made the singer a "must have."

"I put Feinstein in the same company as Barbara Cook and Julie Andrews. He stops in between songs and talks about the where, what, when, why and who. He's not merely an interpreter, but an educator as well."

Feinstein earned his chops as an entertainer while working in piano bars. Over the years, he's refined his technique through a visualization process, which enables him to reach and connect to people in the farthest seats.

"He can have eye contact with everyone in the audience and you will think he is singing to you alone," says Hall. "The only other performer I've seen capable of that kind of connection is Lena Horne."