

The New York Times

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2010

Saving Old Scores From Pop's Dustbin

"Michael Feinstein's American Songbook" isn't a typical rerun of the same old clips looking back on the music of the prerock era with a misty-eyed nostalgia. This

**STEPHEN
HOLDEN**

**TELEVISION
REVIEW**

three-part PBS series, beginning on Wednesday and produced and directed by Amber Edwards, is a quirky, thoughtful mélange of history and biography that celebrates Mr. Feinstein's passion for collecting what many would consider cultural detritus.

The intensity of that passion is exemplified by a scene of Mr. Feinstein, better known as a singer and pianist than as an archivist, bristling with indignation as he stands on a Los Angeles freeway. "Some 40 years ago," he declares above the roar of traffic, "MGM studios dumped thousands and thousands of musical scores by some of the greatest composers of the 20th century, all used as landfill to build this freeway: lost forever."

To Mr. Feinstein, a musician of the old school who once worked as Ira Gershwin's assistant, performing is part of a larger mis-



JAKE LANDIS/PBS

"Michael Feinstein's American Songbook" explores the archives of Mr. Feinstein, above and right, who digs for discarded treasures.

sion: to keep alive a tradition that he values with the fervor of a true believer. For him old recordings, orchestral and band arrangements and sheet music for movies, Broadway musicals, nightclubs and radio and television shows are precious resources

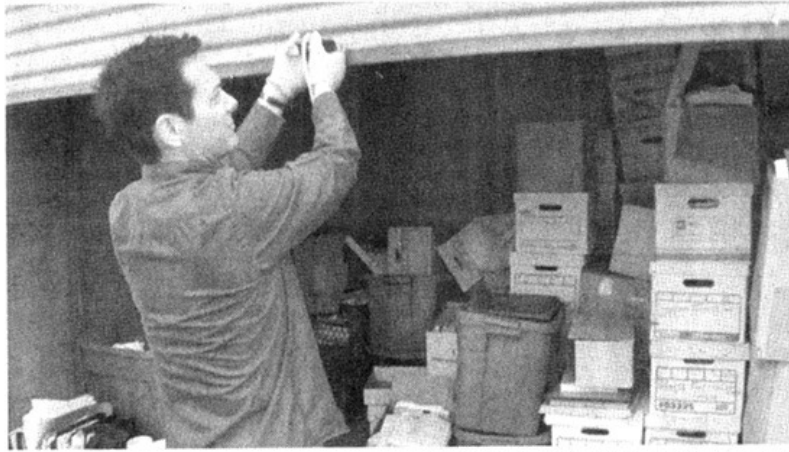
that must be preserved.

"Unless it is heard and performed," he declares, "it will die."

The basements of his homes in New York and Los Angeles are filled with musical material that might otherwise have been discarded, all of it meticulously cataloged. When Mr. Feinstein is not on tour — he plays up to 150 dates a year — much of his spare time is spent in one of those basements, making digital copies of old tapes and recordings and carefully filing them away.

The series is three things woven together: a biographical portrait of Mr. Feinstein, a piano prodigy who grew up in Columbus, Ohio, in a family that treasured the American songbook; an examination of the archivist's profession; and an illustrated personal history of American popular music.

The first episode, "Putting On the Tailfins," looks at the 1950s and '60s and includes a tribute to his dear friend Rosemary Clooney. A segment on Mitch Miller, the Columbia Records executive, credits Mr. Miller with understanding that in selling records, aural novelty was as commercially important as the song. Mr.



DAVE DAVIDSON/HUDSON WEST PRODUCTIONS

Feinstein visits the New Jersey home of Bob Kennedy, a Broadway baritone who died in 2008, to sift through his artifacts, and rummages through the storage locker of W. Earl Brown, the vocal arranger and composer of the Elvis Presley hit "If I Can Dream."

Scenes in other episodes show Mr. Feinstein sharing memorabilia with other collectors, including the society pianist Peter Mintun and the bandleader Vince Giordano, whose group the Night-hawks is widely recognized as playing the most authentic 1920s and '30s jazz today. Mr. Giordano has amassed a collection of 33,000 vintage band arrangements.

The second episode, "Best

Band in the Land" (next Wednesday), revisits the swing era. A segment on Irving Berlin concentrates on his revue "This Is the Army," which became a blockbuster hit movie in 1943. "A New Step Every Day" (Oct. 20) goes back to the '20s and '30s and offers Mr. Feinstein's reflections on the implications of changing technology, as radio, records and especially the microphone influenced the sound of music. Without the microphone, crooners like Rudy Vallee and Frank Sinatra would never have risen to the forefront of popular music.

Because he is a star who has his own nightclub in Manhattan at the Loews Regency Hotel, Mr. Feinstein is in a special position

Michael Feinstein's American Songbook

On PBS stations on Wednesday nights at 8 (check local listings).

Directed by Amber Edwards; Ken Bloom executive producer; Ms. Edwards, producer; Dave Davidson, co-producer and director of photography. Produced by Hudson West Productions.

to promote what he loves. In his live shows, from which many excerpts are included, he tells the histories of the standards he performs, often providing additional lyrics that no one has heard. In another segment in the series, a clip of Al Jolson singing "Toot, Toot Tootsie, Goodbye," while gyrating like Elvis Presley, is revelatory. Mr. Feinstein also subjects the career of Paul Whiteman, the so-called King of Jazz, who blurred the boundaries between jazz and concert music, to critical scrutiny.

On the personal side, the series is a close-up portrait of Mr. Feinstein as a driven perfectionist, whose gregarious partner, Terrence Flannery, handles his business affairs and organizes their social life.

"I don't feel a great need to perform," Mr. Feinstein says. "The desire is to share what I love. I'm basically very shy."