

On the road again: Singer on search for last traditional piano bars for documentary

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From the time she was a little girl, Kathy Hollyâ??s mother would take her to piano bars to join in the singing in its convivial atmosphere. As a child and performer still going in her 7th decade, she has lived through the piano barâ??s heyday as well as its decline.



Kathy Holly has performed around the world and appears in San Francisco clubs. She also hosts a local television show, interviewing performers.

Her career has taken her all over the world, but she started performing as a musician, singer and actor while growing up in San Francisco. She still appears periodically at supper clubs such as The Villa Dâ??Este, and restaurants such as The Bistro SF Grill and Ristorante Jeanne Dâ??Arc as well as private engagements. She also hosts a Pacifica television show, interviewing performing artists.

Sheâ??s also filling her time with a new project, a documentary titled â??The Disappearing Piano Bar.â?• She has been raising money with a Kickstarter campaign to travel to Chicago, New York and Los Angeles to find remaining traditional piano bars.

â??As a child, I was exposed to a love of music,â?• Holly said. â??After parties, weâ??d gather around the piano and sing all the standards.â?• The creation of the piano bar was undoubtedly an extension of the pleasure families experienced singing at home together. â??Now people watch TV, videos or listen to digital music.â?•

Piano bars a family affair

Piano bars proliferated in America from the 1940s through the â??90s. There were piano bars in pizza restaurants, bowling alleys and cocktail lounges. â??Families could take their children and introduce them to live music, so they could enjoy a musical tradition and develop their taste in music,â?• she said.

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Clint Eastwoodâ??s Mission Ranch in Carmel has one of the remaining traditional piano bars in California. (Photo courtesy of TripAdvisor.)

The traditional piano bar is not just a bar with a piano player, or restaurant or lounge with a piano separated from the audience. While there are many bars and restaurants with pianos and performers, the traditional piano bar occupies a section set apart and seats are set right up against the piano. People can put their drinks on a ledge in front of it.

Sometimes a vocalist joins the pianist. People can just listen to the music, typically standards like Gershwin and Cole Porter, or sing along.

â??Sometimes we passed the mic to those who wanted to sing, but the focus is on group participation,â?• Holly said. â??The atmosphere is social and intimate. People would converse

quietly.â?•

Martuniâ??s on Valencia Street near Market is the only place left in San Francisco that is a traditional piano bar, she said. â??But, the younger generation comes in and sometimes talks too loudly, spoiling the intimacy.â?• Clint Eastwood still operates a piano bar in his Mission Ranch hotel and restaurant in Carmel. â??This is a wonderful venue,â?• she said. â??I interviewed a singer and a particpant.â?•

â??Letâ??s put live music back in restaurantsâ??

Her TV show, â??Spotlight,â?• airs monthly on Pacificaâ??s community channel**.** Episodes are available on YouTube.

It was Joe Markey, former host of the stationâ??s â??Give My Regards to Broadway,â?• who suggested she do her own show. She was a guest on his show about seven years ago. To do so, she had to submit a proposal and was required to take some classes at the station.

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â??I had to learn about station protocols and how to work a camera, so I could understand how my guests and I would best come across.â?• Artists brought on the 30-minute show sometimes perform. â??Itâ??s good promo for the artists as they get a copy of the show.â?•

Her mission for the show is to celebrate live music. â??I sell the concept of letâ??s have some live music, put it back in restaurants and clubs. Wouldnâ??t it be great for families to be able to expose their children to live music again?â?•

Holly reads up on her guests so she can effortlessly guide them in talking about themselves and their work. â??Maybe because Iâ??ve taught children, interviewing is natural for me. Iâ??m ready to roll with any surprises.â?•

She has a list of people sheâ??d like to invite on the show, and signs guests up a month in advance. â??Iâ??ve met so many people in show business over my 45 years performing, and friends of friends are always suggesting guests.â?•

San Francisco native with historic roots

A San Francisco native, Hollyâ??s roots go back to her grandparents. Her grandfather, P.H. McCarthy, an Irish immigrant and labor leader, was mayor of San Francisco from 1909 to 1912.

Encouraged by her mother, who did a brief stint on the radio in New York but ultimately became a social worker, Holly went on to mold an exciting career performing around the world. She specialized in jazz, show tunes and international cabaret. Along the way, she married twice and raised a daughter who became a doctor.

Aging has afforded Holly a chance to showcase more of her acting skills. â??Iâ??ve become more of a performer than a singer as Iâ??ve grown older. It allows me to be more comedic. Age is just a number and mine is unlisted,â?• she joked, but said, â?•I donâ??t focus on my age as some of my friends do. If you say youâ??re old, youâ??ll feel old.â?•

Years on the road have given her more memorable stories than aches and pains.

â??I worked for the USO on a base in the middle of the Indian Ocean where I was the only woman. I worked on cruise ships when 400 was the maximum number of people onboard â?? much more intimate than today. I did shows in New York City.â?•

In a Dallas supper club, a cowboy entered with a baby buffalo who proceeded to park itself in the front bar. â?? â??Youâ??ll never see this in California,â?? â?? he announced. â??it was the Wild West.â?•

Paving the way for cabaret in China

In 1979, after Nixon opened the door to China, she was among the first cabaret singers to perform there. Traveling on a cruise ship, the musicians stopped to perform in several ports. â??We performed in places such as The Friendship Hotel in Beijing and in a little theater in a workerâ??s cultural palace where only men workers came to listen, all dressed in Mao outfits.â?•

She and her entourage were treated like artist royalty. â??Everywhere I walked in Shanghai and Beijing, I was followed by 300 people who wanted to learn English.â?•

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Her group wasnâ??t allowed to take pictures or record, and they were closely watched. â??In spite of the limitations, we were accepted and given generous gifts like 10-course dinners. I must have eaten Peking duck at least 15 times.â?• Holly asked for a trip down the coast to a town where Chinese party heads vacationed, and a tour with a guide was set up for her.

The trip changed her life in more than one way. She met her first husband on the cruise. â??He was the bandâ??s drummer. We fell in love and were married less than a year later.â?• Even though that marriage ended in divorce after seven years, they continued to co-parent their daughter until his premature death.

Holly worked in California during her daughterâ??s formative years, but would also take her on the road. â??The experience of travelling and seeing her Mom work was very positive for her,â?• Holly said. â??My daughter and my granddaughter are my biggest fans!â?•

Performing on the road is still part of Hollyâ??s life plan. She and other musicians from the Bay Area are booked in March for dinner shows in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

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