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## A voice of his own

He's been approved -- i.e., applauded -- in New York; it's time Boston learned about its own **Dane Vannatter**

by Robert Nesti

**Dane Vannatter** performed at Ryle's, Inman Square, Aug. 22.

In just a few years Dane Vannatter has gone from winning an amateur singing contest at a Boston piano bar to being nominated for a MAC Award by the Manhattan Association of Cabaret and Clubs for his New York debut. Not bad for a singer who didn't start to sing professionally until he was 30 years old. "This young man from Beantown," wrote Cabaret Hotline critic John Hoglund about his first Manhattan appearance, "has one of the finest voices heard in NYC in sometime-right up there with Tom Andersen, Phillip Officer and other fine tenors on the current cabaret scene." But due to the limited venues for cabaret artists here in Boston, Vannatter's appearances here have been far too few. This made his recent appearance at Ryle's all the more welcome: it was great to hear what New York critics and audiences are so enthusiastic about.

Accompanied by his long-time collaborator Doug Hammer and three talented musicians, the strikingly good-looking singer clearly wanted to show a home town audience his unique cabaret style, closer in style to that of a jazz crooner than a typical cabaret performer.

And he certainly didn't disappoint. His varied program and relaxed performance style made for a perfect summer's night entertainment, especially in the synergy that developed between the singer and the musicians, who included Eric Preusser (drums), Joshua Davis (bass), Valentin Gregor (violin) and Hammer (keyboards). Certainly the inclusion of Gregor was an inspired, if unusual choice for a cabaret performer, but it only underscored the keen intelligence that Vannatter and Hammer brought to his material. And his wry sense of humor was in evidence throughout, especially early on when it appeared that he was going to be upstaged by the MBTA buses arriving right outside the club's windows. "Actually last week I was on my way over here, and when I got to Harvard Square I asked the attendant 'How do I get to Inman Square?' And he said '69' will get you to Inman Square.' And I said, 'Hey, I just want to sing.'"

### Laid-back tone

And sing he did, mixing familiar standards with many less well-known songs that reflected his eclectic musical interests. Only a handful of the songs were written after 1970 and few were drawn from the theater; instead Vannatter focused on lesser-known titles of

the Great American songbook. He opened with a pair of catchy songs from the 1950s: Bart Howard's "Let Me Love You" and the familiar "That's All," which set the evening's laid-back tone perfectly. What followed included a scattering of songs by Hoagy Carmichael, the great, underrated songwriter from the first half of the century to whom Vannatter paid tribute earlier this summer in a show at Manhattan's Sardi's. The best-known of these was "The Nearness of You," which Vannatter gave an intimate, beautifully felt interpretation, and the poignant blues "Baltimore Oriole," here dedicated to Billie Holiday. He also put a swinging twist on "The Way You Look Tonight," which he cleverly joined with "They Can't Take That Away From Me," but best of all was his dramatic reading of an obscure Johnny Mathis song, "Wild is the Wind," which was sumptuously augmented by Doug Hammer's synthesized arrangement.

Stevie Wonder's "Overjoyed" ended the first half, and pointed out the similarities between Vannatter's and Wonder's resonant voice. Others have compared him with Johnny Mathis and Chet Baker; but what makes Vannatter such a stand-out is that he's carving out his own vocal style, one that mixes facets of jazz and cabaret with intelligence and care.

That vocal style was certainly in evidence in the second half of the show where Vannatter and his combo came together in a series of numbers that showcased both their musical rapport and improvisational skills, best heard in another obscure Hoagy Carmichael gem, "Old Man Harlem." Towards the end of the evening Vannatter featured two songs by local Boston composers, the likable "Enough to Make a Grown Man Cry" by Steve Short and the Stevie Wonderish "My Time, My Wish," which was nicely augmented by an on-stage appearance by the song's composer, singer Ron Murphy.

If any song can be considered Vannatter's signature tune it's "Here's to Life," a contemporary ballad that soars with intensity in his hands. Even after three encores, which included a dramatic reading of Billie Holiday's "Billie's Blues," the audience still wanted more. But for now his future appearances will be one Friday a month at Club Cafe, and as part of the Music America tribute at the end of August. An encore of, as Vannatter put it, these "five guys named Moe" at Ryle's is being planned for sometime in the future. It will be well worth catching.