

Singer tells tales from songbook

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In its history, the Hal Leonard Jazz Series at the Pabst has never presented a more crowd-pleasing performer than John Pizzarelli. Or one who worked harder - while looking cooler - than the guitarist-singer did Saturday night, stuffing 850 customers into his hip pocket.

Besides his advertised talents, Pizzarelli displayed superb storytelling and musical mimicry. In a bit of showbiz self-mockery, he promised to "bond with anyone" who would buy his CDs post-concert. No need, the bonding was already complete.

Leading a cohesive quartet, Pizzarelli sang softly but winningly, played dazzling seven-string guitar and fired off a remarkable series of vocal-instrumental "scat" solos. He drew nearly all of his repertoire from the Great American Songbook. Vocally, except when scatting, he never strayed far from the melody. Instrumentally, he improvised with the chops of a premier jazz artist.

In the manner of performers on tour, he dipped deep into his most recent CD, a Frank Sinatra collection. Pizzarelli's tribute to the art was fully frank in his appraisal of the artist, with whom Pizzarelli once toured.

Meeting his hero, Pizzarelli recalled staring into eyes "the color of a gas flame" and hearing only these words "Eat something, you look bad," and "This conversation is over." So much for "the great romantic's" Italian brotherhood.

A bit later Saturday, Pizzarelli got bigger laughs with an extended rendition of something called "I Like Jersey Best." "After this," he threw away in a sardonic stage whisper, "You'll realize why I'm the world's greatest entertainer."

With that, the quartet stormed through a satirical mini-history of pop, affectionately skewering Paul Simon, Bruce Springsteen, the Beach Boys, James Taylor and, hang on, Billie Holliday, among others. The crowd roared, breaking only to "whoo-ee-oo" along with the Beach Boys.

Instrumentally, Pizzarelli shared solo honors and eight-bar "trades" with virtuoso pianist Larry Fuller. Drummer Tony Tedesco and bassist brother Martin Pizzarelli built a firm rhythmic foundation.

Before the "Jersey" joke-a-thon, Pizzarelli & Co. supplied many musical peaks. Some came on the wordless romps, guitar and voice merged, through George Gershwin's "Oh, Lady Be Good," and "I Got Rhythm."

Although Pizzarelli's light tenor is more suited to up-tempo sprints than sustaining ballads, some of his best singing Saturday came on love songs. Several were little-known gems from the classic pop archives.

"If Dreams Come True" included a chorus of lovely, unaccompanied piano-guitar counterpoint. Vocally, Pizzarelli struggled while navigating the jagged intervals in Jule Styne's "It's Sunday." But he winningly delivered its moving lyric and original guitar accompaniment.

This was a wholly satisfying evening from a performer, to the manner born, who's never forgotten a lyric, lick or legend from nearly half a century in and around show business.