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Music Review | John Pizzarelli

Wrestling With Sinatra, but It's a Very Friendly Fight

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Sooner or later, every man who sings standards has to wrestle with the ghost of Frank Sinatra. And on Saturday evening at the Allen Room as part of Lincoln Center's American Songbook series, it was John Pizzarelli's turn.

This gifted guitarist and singer with deep roots in traditional jazz recently released a likable tribute album, "Dear Mr. Sinatra" (Telarc), recorded with the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra. On Saturday he performed much of that album with an excellent 17-piece big band that kicked out with a brawling, Count Basie-like exuberance minus the Count's jet-propelled piano signature.

In almost every way imaginable except one, Mr. Pizzarelli is Sinatra's temperamental opposite. Where Sinatra projected intense emotional heat at all times, Mr. Pizzarelli is innately cool, sly and playful in the mode of his biggest influence, Nat King Cole. From the mid-1950s onward, Sinatra injected pop singing with deepening shades of menace, hostility, arrogance, self-pity and depression. Mr. Pizzarelli is fundamentally a nice guy. Any rage or sorrow he may feel is diverted into humor. Even singing that cry-in-your-beer standard, "One for My Baby," on Saturday, he remained the casual cool cat, shrugging off the blues as he leaves the bar to hit "that long, long road." "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning," a Sinatra cry from the dark night of the soul, was relaxed into a languid, easygoing swing ballad.

Mr. Pizzarelli is a great comic storyteller and mimic whose verbal precision almost matches his dexterity as a high-speed finger-picker who scats in unison with his guitar solos. At the second of Saturday's two shows, he recalled his first backstage meeting with Sinatra, for whom he opened some European dates. He described Sinatra's famous blue eyes as having the color and intensity

of searing blue flames on gas jets. The five words Sinatra spoke to him he remembered with amusement: "Eat something. You look bad."

Where the two singers share common ground is in their fundamental rhythmic confidence. Mr. Pizzarelli swings naturally in a light, crooning voice that suggests a more nasal offshoot of Cole in his early trio days. The harder he swings, the better he sounds. The high point of Saturday's concert was a rendition of "Yes Sir, That's My Baby" that exploded with enthusiasm and excitement.

The kind of joy that effuses from Mr. Pizzarelli seems to come as naturally as breathing. His last three words to the audience summed it up: "Music is good."