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Nightclub Tradition Gets a Jolt Of Youth

By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

Stately grandeur and youthful intensity: the annual New York Cabaret Convention at the Rose Theater has never lacked for great ladies and refined gentlemen. But as for youth (performers under 50), it has always struggled to forge a credible connection between a nightclub tradition nearly done in by rock 'n' roll and television and the idea of a future. This year was different. All it takes to demonstrate that somehow or other the tradition goes on is a couple of exceptional rising talents. And at the convention's opening-night gala on Thursday, two singers — T. Oliver Reid and Amanda King — leapt out from the pack.



[Mr. Reid](#), who has performed in Broadway ensembles for more than a decade, recently won the third annual Metrostar Talent Challenge at the Metropolitan Room. And he transformed the standards “Lucky to Be Me,” “Glad to Be Unhappy” and “Autumn in New York” into deeply personal reflections, his sweet falsetto distilling the yearning and uncertainty in that great Vernon Duke meditation on fall. Mr. Reid declared himself an admirer of [Bobby Short](#), to whom he bears some vocal resemblance, although the wistfulness of his tone and the smoothness of his delivery were all his own.

[Ms. King](#), a San Francisco singer making her New York debut, was almost as captivating. She delivered a pensive, understated “Lazy Afternoon” that displayed an impressive tonal control and the right air of dreamily sensuous hyper-awareness of nature in full bloom.

These singers threw into relief the dignified appearances of [Angela Lansbury](#), [Marian Seldes](#), Barbara Carroll and Marilyn Maye. Ms. Lansbury introduced Ms. Seldes who was presented with the convention's first award of appreciation. Ms. Seldes recalled Donald Smith, the convention's producer and mastermind, taking her to see [its spiritual godmother, Mabel Mercer](#), at the St. Regis Hotel in the 1950s and being spellbound by Mercer's perfect diction and the subtlety of feeling she lavished on each word.

Ms. Carroll, accompanied on bass by Jay Leonhart, played a pianistic [Sondheim](#) suite whose songs, connected by a recurring fragment of the “Night Waltz” from “A Little Night Music,” evoked a whirling dance of life. Its emotional turning points were her parlando renditions of “A Parade in Town” and “With So Little to Be Sure Of.”

Ms. Maye, who was given the Mabel Mercer Award, imparted an exuberant clout to a [Jerry Herman](#) medley (“The Best of Times” and “It's Today!”), which was all the more moving coming from the voice of a woman in her 80s with inexhaustible stamina and joie de vivre. All in all, this was the convention's strongest opening night in memory.

The New York Cabaret Convention continues on Saturday at the Rose Theater, Frederick P. Rose Hall, Jazz at Lincoln Center, 60th Street and Broadway, (212) 721-6500, [mabelmercer.org](#) and [jalc.org](#).

photo by Richard Termine