

Bandleader Michael Andrew brings 17-piece ensemble to R.I. for ‘Gershwin Songbook’

By Keith Powers / Special to The Journal

Posted Feb 15, 2018 at 9:00 PM

It’s part of the FirstWorks Artistic Icons Series, which focuses this season on jazz greats.

George Gershwin did it all.

He wrote songs: just try to get “Someone to Watch Over Me” or “I Got Rhythm” out of your head. Or “Swanee” — Al Jolson’s classic — Gershwin wrote that.

The memories of his musicals — “An American in Paris,” “Girl Crazy,” for instance — have lasted long after their Broadway runs were done. “Rhapsody in Blue” is a staple for American symphony orchestras. And then there’s “Porgy and Bess,” perhaps the greatest American opera ever.

When he died in 1937, Gershwin was just beginning. He was only 38.

One hundred years after some of his music was written, it still has emotional heft, and swing. Bandleader Michael Andrew, a well-known interpreter of the American songbook, brings his 17-piece ensemble to Veterans Memorial Auditorium on Feb. 22, to explore the musical world that Gershwin created.

Part of the FirstWorks Artistic Icons Series, which focuses this season on jazz greats, Andrew says, “This tour emphasizes the big band, but with Gershwin it could be a wide range of things.

“You can do his music with just a singer, or with a jazz combo, or with a symphony orchestra,” he says. “All of it is sophisticated. In lots of ways, Gershwin created the forms that jazz musicians — all musicians — study. The rhythm changes. The chord progressions. There’s so much originality.”

Andrew will sing, and conduct — “but sometimes I just step away and let them go. Or sometimes I’m directing the nuances. And then sometimes they really need me, when there’s a drastic tempo change,” he says of leading the ensemble.

“We do emphasize the big band, so our version of ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ is different, a lot more groove-oriented,” he says. “We do a little blues section from ‘American in Paris,’ based on the Harry James arrangement. All our songs are custom arrangements in fact: two of our sax players do some, and we’re doing some from an old friend and collaborator, Scott Whitfield.”

Andrew has worked as an interpreter of many American singers and songwriters — Bobby Darin, Sinatra, Johnny Mercer. He has many credits as a performer onstage — he was the house singer for years at Rockefeller Center’s Rainbow Room — and on film. He also starred in the musical “Nutty Professor,” directed by the original nut himself, Jerry Lewis.

Singing Gershwin lets Andrew bring his own style to the music. “But you get different influences that define you,” he says. “I do ‘Can’t Take That Away from Me’ like Sinatra — it was a signature song. So was ‘The Way You Wear Your Hat.’

“I started out doing Bobby Darin, and then people thought I was really too much like him,” he says. “So then I listened to Ella. I think you immerse yourself with the ghost of these artists. You want to be authentic, and you want to perform it authentically.

“It’s a matter of respect, really,” he says. “I’m not Johnny Mercer. I’m not Irving Berlin. I’m not going to be doing these songs any better than Sinatra. And I’m not Gershwin. But my heart is really in keeping these American treasures alive.”

— *Keith Powers covers music and the arts for the GateHouse papers and WBUR’s The ARTery. On Twitter at [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith).*

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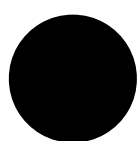
What: “American Rhapsody: The Gershwin Songbook,” part of the FirstWorks Artistic Icons Series

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 22

Where: Veterans Memorial Auditorium, 1 Avenue of the Arts, Providence

Tickets: \$28-\$88

Information: first-works.org, (401) 421-4278



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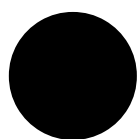
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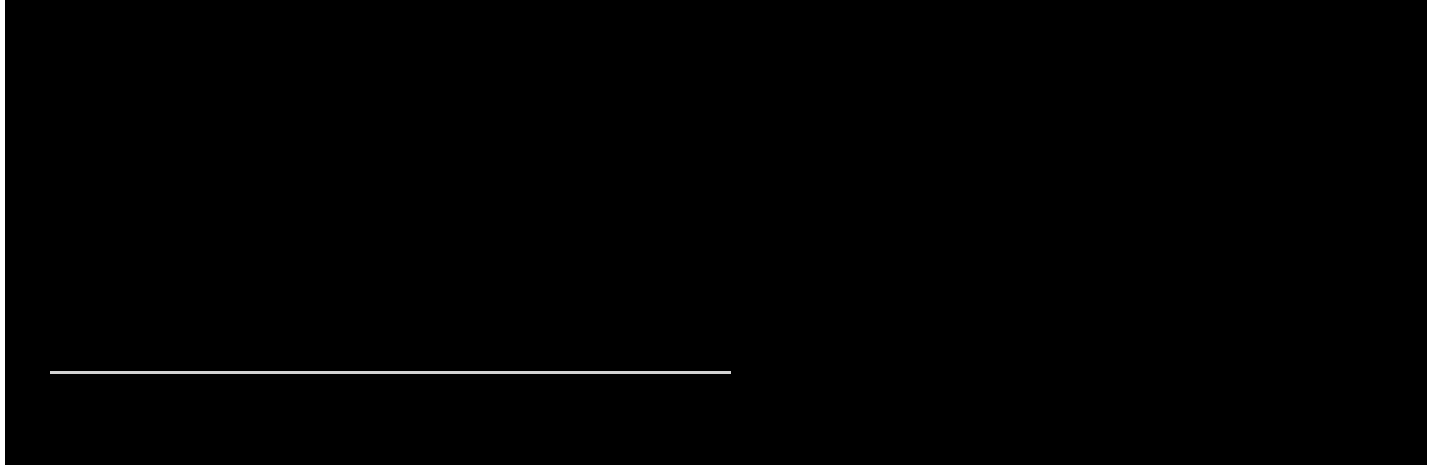
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