

TS: Definitely there is some overlap here, but I would say some definite division as well. As phenomenal a singer as Joni is, I believe her most profound cultural influence will be her compositions, at least one of which (“Both Sides Now”) was recorded by Sinatra — although this is not a recording I like so much.

NP: Kurt Elling was at the Lobero with his Sinatra tribute early in the year, and he was saying he was half-reluctant to do much in the way of serious Sinatra tribute-making because of his closeness to the source — in his case, his very range, timbre and basic musical patois. In your own different (and differently gendered) way, you are also quite close to Sinatra — maybe his phrasing, insistence on great songs and arrangements, and other factors. Is that fair to say?

TS: That’s a lovely compliment to me, and certainly I hope to have learned much about phrasing and dynamics and the reading of a lyric from Sinatra. But I think — maybe like Kurt — I am more inclined than Frank to sing the sax part, although I believe Sinatra could have done so had he wanted to.

NP: Two recent encounters with your voice have been in contexts of extreme contrast. You sang “The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines” at the Monterey Jazz Festival in September in arranger Vince Mendoza’s wonderful big band project “Jaco’s World,” and your album of last year, “Paris Sessions,” was a stripped-down affair with guitarist Serge Merlaud. Have you been enjoying venturing out into diverse instrumental settings, large and small, as a variation on the long-standing setting of your own band?

TS: Yes, it’s been a few years of going both bigger, with Vince, with various big band projects, with The Turtle Island Quartet, and smaller — with Serge — than the TSB (Tierney Sutton Band, a quartet). I’ve definitely exercised some new muscles and learned a lot about myself and about the TS Band, which still inspires me. I’m thrilled to be back touring with this musical marriage of 22 years.

NP: I remember talking to you about a decade ago, around the time of your Sinatra-esque album “Dancing in the Dark.” You were singing Frank’s praises then, but admitted to having a reawakening, saying “I had been anti-Frank during my jazz

nun years.” After that “jazz nun” period, has the swing and wisdom of Frank held sway on your musical appreciation of who he was and what he achieved?

TS: Definitely. It’s hard to remember what it was like not to worship Frank. But occasionally I have to convert someone, so I have my go-to recordings and arguments ready.

NP: So far your discography, apart from the Joni tribute, has been pretty well entrenched in the classic Great American Songbook and related material — albeit often intriguingly re-thought and re-arranged. Is that the musical place that best suits your musical voice, in the larger sense of the term?

TS: I believe so. I’m starting to feel very much alone as a jazz singer who doesn’t write his or her own songs, but at the same time it feels to me like there might still be a place for an interpreter. At least I hope so.

NP: Having been on the scene for many years now, how would you assess the jazz vocal scene now, as compared to when you really started entering the public ear/atmosphere?

TS: In general, I think there seem to always be talented, young singers entering the scene, and at this point, many of them are my former students — Gretchen Parlato, Sara Gazarek to name two.

NP: What is on the horizon for you, in terms of projects, recordings and other things? Anything we need to know about?

TS: Lots of things are percolating. The TSB has already started looking at the musical legacy of Sting and another project has recently come up as well (that I can’t discuss yet) and I have several collaborations in the works. There is a recording of several Burt Bacharach songs, with bassist Gabriel Espinosa and harmonica player Hendrick Meurkins, and another emerging project with cellist Mark Summer and pianist Mitch Forman, plus another Paris Sessions recording with Serge and Kevin.

Yikes, when I write that all down I’m exhausted, and I know I’m forgetting something.

NP: Does this feel like a good, healthy phase in your long and ongoing musical journey?

TS: Yes. It’s been a terrifying, exciting period for me. The business is changing. Everything is up in the air but at the same time everything is possible.

Come fly with them, for Christmas

‘RAT PACK CHRISTMAS’ BRINGS A CLASSY YULETIDE TO THE GRANADA

By Ted Mills,
News-Press Correspondent



“Rat Pack Christmas”

When: 7:30 Tuesday
Where: Granada Theatre,
1214 State St.
Cost: \$33-\$68
Information: 899-2222,
granadasb.org

The confluence of pop music’s great entertainers known as the Rat Pack — Frank Sinatra, Dean

Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., and Joey Bishop — is a bit like the Wild West. It was a very brief moment in time — roughly five years in popularity, and only a month when the group could surprise Las Vegas audiences with impromptu appearances — but its legend, filled with classic American songbook tunes, sharp-dressed men, pre-health code access to tobacco and alcohol, pre-Disneyfication of Las Vegas, lives on. It’s the personification of early 1960s cool. A number of tribute shows have appeared over the last 20 years, but the one coming to The Granada Theatre on Tuesday can claim Rat pedigree.

Sandy Hackett is the son of the late comedian Buddy Hackett, whose voice is used in the beginning of the show as The Voice of God, bringing the four artists back from heaven for “one last concert,” a combination of holiday songs and classic hits.

“All those guys celebrated the holidays, and they all sang those holiday and Christmas songs, and we wanted to change up the show a bit,” says Mr. Hackett. As there are many examples of holiday tunes from these performers — gathered together on several compilation albums — turning their touring show into a Christmas special was easy.

“When these guys worked together every day was a holiday,” he jokes.



Photo courtesy Hackett Miller Company, Inc.

The cast of “Rat Pack Christmas” brings their holiday special to town.

Mr. Hackett plays Joey Bishop in the show, and has been portraying his dad’s friend for many years after Bishop himself called and asked Mr. Hackett to play him in an HBO movie. (In the end, Mr. Hackett didn’t get cast, but the idea — and the blessing — had stuck.) The Rat Pack show has been running since 2009 and on tour since 2010.

Dean Martin is played by Tom Wallek, an actor and stand-up comedian, and former understudy of Mr. Hackett’s Bishop. Frank Sinatra is played by Angelo Babbaro, and Kenny Jones plays Sammy Davis Jr. Also appearing is Ashleigh Miller, Lisa and Sandy’s 9-year-old daughter, appearing for Davis’ number “Candyman.”

The producer of the show is Lisa Dawn Miller, Mr. Hackett’s wife, and daughter of songwriter Ron Miller (“For Once in My Life,” “Yester-me, Yester-you, Yesterday,” “Touch Me in the Morning.”) She plays “Frank’s One Love” in the show, aka Ava Gardner, and is also a songwriter. Her two original songs, “It’s

Christmas” and “My Favorite Time of Year,” also debut in the show, along with selections from her father’s catalog.

“Unlike any other production of the Rat Pack, we bring the guys back to modern day in their prime,” Mr. Hackett explains. “It opens up the comedy vein for us and keeps it very contemporary. It’s whatever’s going on in the world, nationally or internationally. Even (news) in Santa Barbara. When we get there we might have a little fun with that.”

With the continual appeal of the era — which many now equate with the show “Mad Men” — the Rat Pack revival may continue on for decades.

“The chemistry those guys had on stage, and the love they had for each other, is still so powerful today,” Ms. Miller says. “They had such a bond and friendship that they could get away with things that might not be considered politically correct today. But it emanated from a place of love. And that power, that’s something that people wanted to touch and be a part of.”