

POPULAR MUSIC

My favorite things

Pianist plays whatever he wants on new CD

By MYRNA PETLICKI

It's not easy to classify Jeff Manuel's new CD, "Music for a Golden Age." That's fine with the Edgebrook pianist who recorded the album in his home studio, choosing 16 of his favorite pieces from his vast, diverse repertoire. Selections range from the Lennon-McCartney tune, "Here Comes the Sun," to Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo." Also included are a handful of Manuel's own tunes, demonstrating his musical versatility.

Away from his keyboard, Manuel demonstrated a quick wit as he offered a perfectly logical explanation for recording a mixed bag of favorite songs rather than selecting tunes that fit a particular musical slot.

"Why should I record something that — on the one-in-a-million chance it does catch on — I won't want to play?" he said.

Manuel took his time creating the album. "I did have the luxury of recording over about the space of a year," he said. "I kept throwing away stuff that didn't seem to have something really great in it."

The final result is "the best recordings of the pieces that I like," he said. The self-deprecating pianist reported that people who have heard the album have told him that "it either sounds like Leon Redbone playing piano or Chopin in a bar."

Manuel has been earning his living as a pianist since completing a degree in classical piano performance from Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. Under the blanket label Jeff Manuel Private Practice he performs solo, as part of a piano-woodwinds duo, in a trio with a saxophonist and drummer, and with larger bands.

Manuel's various groups play at a wide variety of events. He recently performed at a reception for Barbara Bush, and has also played at Operation Push banquets, as well as at a reception for Darryl Hannah and the late John F.

Selections on Manuel's new CD range from the Lennon-McCartney tune, "Here Comes the Sun," to Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo," plus a handful of his own tunes.



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Jeff Manuel

Kennedy Jr. Just because he has played for celebrities, Manuel quickly added, "doesn't mean that any client is more interesting than any other."

Prior to starting Private Practice, Manuel was the house pianist at the Drake Hotel for five years. Although he has played piano seriously since childhood, that wasn't the career path that he originally intended to follow. Manuel spent two years of college in a pre-law program.

"Then I realized that the only reason I didn't want to be a pianist was because it wasn't a respectable occupation," he said. "But the more I learned about law..."

Frank Donaldson, who performed for 12 years with Ramsey Lewis and has played with Corky Siegel for nine years, has worked as a drummer in Manuel's trio for about five years. "When I play with Jeff, I have fun," Donaldson said. "He is a very creative guy. He has a very large repertoire, and he is very creative in his soloing, and emotional in his soloing. We get an unbelievable response."

Donaldson added that Manuel "has a nice variety of styles, because he knows rock 'n' roll tunes and he knows jazz tunes. He also knows a certain amount of ethnic tunes, and he also has a very strong classical repertoire."

Manuel: "When I perform solo, a lot



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of times I go from classical to blues to jazz. Anything that doesn't bore me, many times I've found, doesn't bore the listener. I try not to be like a lobotomized lounge player — with varying degrees of success."

The pianist has a very supportive family, which he considers a prerequisite to success in his chosen field. He reinforced that theory by telling a joke. "Do you know what they call a musician who isn't married?" Manuel asked. "Homeless."

Fortunately, Manuel does have a place to live thanks to "the support of a working wife," he said. He and spouse Mary Jo have been married for 23 years and have two children, 15-year-old Rebecca and 13-year-old Wilson.

Manuel is hoping that his album will serve as "something of an

introduction to folks farther up the musical food chain," he said. "It would be a wonderful thing to actually make a good living playing music."

Manuel noted that he hasn't heard many recordings that sound like "Music for a Golden Age." He said that "could mean that I'm either barking totally up the wrong tree and am completely doomed. Or, there's a faint possibility that I might have found a style and a focus that other people might be looking for too. Then, once this catches on and I've gone platinum, I will enjoy the limo."

"Music for a Golden Age" is available at Bravissimo, 5500 Devon; Les-On Drugs, 5364 W. Devon; Laurie's Atomic Records, Lincoln and Western in Chicago; Old Town School of Folk Music, 4536 N. Lincoln Ave.; and directly from Jeff Manuel at (773) 775-4065.