



Ron Hawking

His Way: Ron Hawking Unplugged

FAMED BARRINGTON SINGING STAR RON HAWKING HAS TURNED 68, BUT DON'T LOOK FOR ANY SIGN HE'S SLOWING DOWN.

TONY BENNETT OWNS America's ultimate pop music voice. He is 90. Retire? Don't be daft. He has 10,000 songs yet to sing, and you'll want to hear every one of them

Ron Hawking owns Chicago's ultimate pop music voice. He is 68. Retire? Don't be daft. He has more than 20,000 songs yet to sing.

"This horse was bred to run," Hawking says of himself. "This is what I was predestined to do. It's not only what I do; it's what I was made to do."

No one suggested Bennett retire 22 years ago when he was 68. His "pipes" resonate as they did then. He won a Grammy with duet-partner-of-the-moment Lady Gaga. His voice—the instrument of his art—endures. The stage presence

deepens and ripens. Bennett was a fit, boyish, fifty-ish, middle-aged man at 68, just as Hawking is today.

Bennett won his latest Grammy in a category for which Hawking was also nominated. "Of course he won; he is Tony Bennett," Hawking says with honest deference.

But the temptation to compare seems apt.

If Bennett stands guard over his iconic place in culture, what stops Hawking? It's rhetorical. The answer is nothing, and he has plans to prove that over the next 20 years.

Bennett scored his first pop hit "Because of You" in 1951 when Ron Hawking was two. That was two years before Hawking scored his first

singing "hit" on a Chicago television talent show.

Contemporaries in the Chicago Cabaret Professionals already have honored Hawking with 2015's Gold Coast Award for his contribution to arts and entertainment. The Chicago Music Awards also honored him in 2014 with The Lifetime Achievement Awards. "A friend asked me if that's the award you get right before you die," Hawking says with a laugh. "That's not on my bucket list."

If final curtain calls were the instinct of admirers, it's miscast. Hawking now seems insistent to prove he's no six-decade "overnight sensation."

All Hawking needs are a microphone, a stage, a crowd, and Amy, his wife, at his side.



Ron Hawking holds his first recorded song, "Because Your Mine", which was recorded on May 10, 1953 during the Morris B. Sach's Amateur Hour.

We sat down for three hours in the Barrington Hills home they share, awash in music and adorned with dozens of framed images of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis, Jr. Their inspiration shaped him. This is a singer's home.

He has lived three separate lives—jazz club spellbinder and "voice impersonator" star of countless TV ads, survivor of cancer, and then solo producer and financier of a 1998–2006 Chicago stage homage to Sinatra that earned him the Chicago musical hall of fame.

He's been the voice of "Charlie the Tuna," "Snap, Crackle and Pop," Louis Armstrong, Nate Cole and a "Kenny Rogers" perfume ad so perfect that Kenny Rogers was turned down because he didn't sound enough like himself doing his own voice. Hawking was more Kenny Rogers than the original.

Then there was the "Wolfman Jack" voiceover ad. In her Chicago advertising days three decades ago, Barringtonian Amy Stahr hired Hawking for the "Wolfman" soundtrack impersonation. Good gig. Hawking married her 27 years ago. Even better gig. They have two grown children.

Hawking is most known for "His Way: A Tribute to Frank Sinatra" that ran from 1998 to 2006. And music now? He has reached the fourth plateau as master of his own voice that, for the first time, uncompromisingly represents himself alone. These days he lends his voice only occasionally to honor other singers when fans or corporate customers plead for it. He still does a perfect mimicry of Jack

Nicholson, Johnny Mathis, and David Letterman.

But Hawking's music is all Hawking now. His most recent recording of Moody Blues rock standard "Nights in White Satin" is a gorgeous rendition in Italian. This is an interpretation he might never have done before. The rich, emotional baritone is all him. Sinatra, Sammy, and Charlie the Tuna are gone. This is Hawking unadorned.

DR: *You were on stage at an early age. Is this what you were always going to be?*

RH: I knew I could sing at an early age. I always had the big voice. On May 10, 1953, when I was 4, I was on the Morris B. Sachs Amateur Hour on Chicago TV and I won. I still have the original

recording. They spelled my name wrong on the label. That was sort of the beginning. The family was always musical. My dad had a great singing voice and did some singing impressions; so I guess I learned by listening to him. Mom had a great voice, too. She was Italian; so we heard Mario Lanza all the time; so I was always around music. I remember when I was a small boy that my parents were inside a flower store, and I was sitting in the car pretending to sing like Louis Armstrong. And I suddenly realized that I could make my voice go exactly where his did. Years later I was cast as Louis's voice for a Citizen watch ad.

In college I had a band called "The Summer Winds." My sax player was telling me about Sammy's live recording from the Sands in Las Vegas and how he did some impressions. I told him, hey man, I can do that, too. So Sammy was a huge inspiration to me as a young performer, and I like to think of him as my music mentor.

DR: *It's been 20 years since your Sinatra-esque tribute. Would you ever restage that show and take it on tour?*

RH: I'd love to do it again; love to book a tour. There've been so many singers that have come out of the woodwork in the last few years 'doing Frank' that's really cheapened the brand. But I'd love to tour that show again. My new music is the music that I want to do. It was great to be known as the 'Sinatra guy' but, even in the Sinatra show it was never about me mimicking Sinatra. It was all about the music ... Listening to that music now is a musical lesson.




Ron Hawking is well-known for his Rat Pack tribute show that ran from 1998 to 2006.



Ron Hawking celebrates 50 years in the music industry this year.

DR: *The common metaphor for those stricken by cancer is that they must wage war. How did that experience in 1995—a year of surgery, chemotherapy, and recovery—affect you and what did you bring away from it?*

RH: Yes, it did change me. It shakes you to the core in ways you don't realize could happen. I had been in the hospital for three weeks on chemo and was getting sicker and weaker with nausea and headaches every day. Then the doctors changed the chemo cocktail because I couldn't breathe ... it was dicey. I was in harm's way ... chemotherapy takes you right up to the edge of dying. But I had said to myself that if I survived, I was going to do what I always wanted to—put on a show. Even if no one else agreed I had enough 'marquee value.' I decided that if no one would help, they'd have to get out of my way. It turned out to be a hit, though I'd never put on a show before. It was magical. You don't always know it at the time, but it was true magic. After you get through chemotherapy you feel vulnerable. If you survive, you know the grass is greener and sky is bluer, and you know you are on the other side of that tunnel.

There is nothing in that human equation to suggest Ron Hawking will ever slow down. 

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