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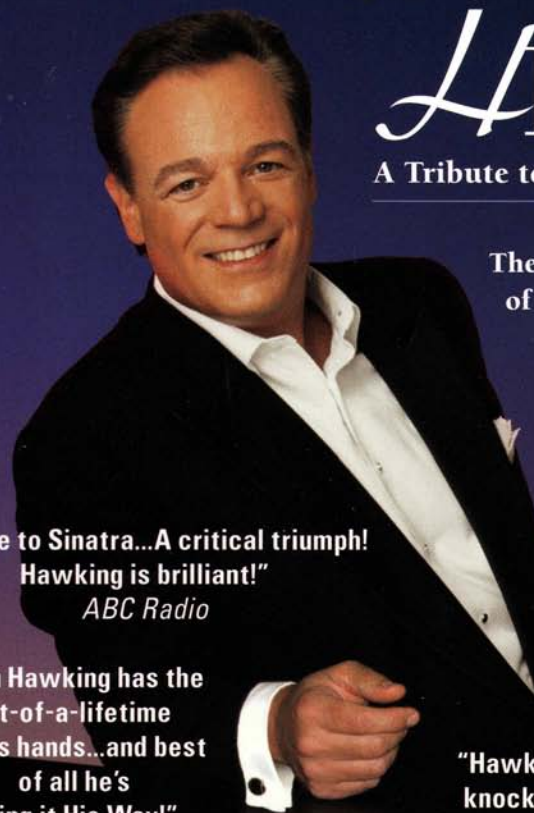
## Ron Hawking **Swings Sinatra**

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Ron Hawking

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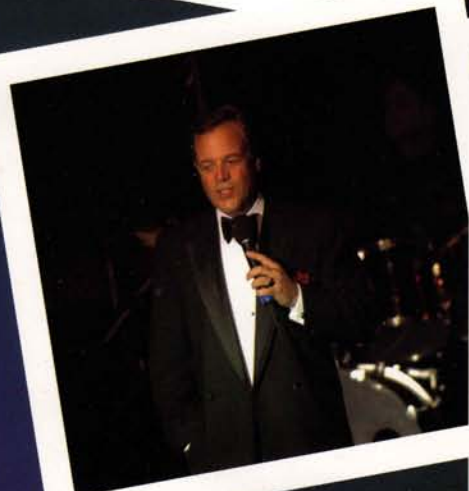
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Ron Hawking  
*in*  
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# Stylistically Sinatra, but not a 'steal'

■ Ron Hawking's tribute to Ol' Blue Eyes at the Norris was wildly applauded.

By JUDY REINERT

Kane County Chronicle

ST. CHARLES — Ring-a-ding-ding!

The Norris Center audience on Saturday sprang to their feet wildly applauding Ron Hawking in "HIS WAY — A Tribute to The Man and His Music."

Hawking kept his promise. He didn't imitate Frank Sinatra, though he does have a fine baritone, perfect diction a la

Frank, and brilliant phrasing.

With your eyes closed, his voice at

times — like in "Witchcraft" and "Come Fly With Me" — sounded very much like Ol' Blue Eyes in the '60s. Yet, when Hawking said his purpose in regard to Sinatra was to, "Let the art live; Let me deliver," he hit the bull's eye by having new arrangements stylistically Sinatra, but not steals.

Hawking could have come across as an imitator had he stuck strictly with Sinatra



**RON HAWKING:** He pays tribute to Sinatra by singing his music, but is not an imitator.

tunes delivered in a that Jersey guy's style. But, we believed he wasn't mimicking when he broke out with his brilliant imitations of the Rat Pack — Dean Martin and Sammy Davis.

How effortlessly he slips from voice to voice without taking a second's break to slip into a new character. He's mastered the art of impressionism.

His takes on Willie Nelson, Louis Armstrong Johnny Mathis and Jimmy Durante, not to mention Carol Channing, were welcome diversions. And, they

kept the Sinatra tribute fresh.

Hawking is an engaging and gifted performer. With conductor and arranger Bill Rogers leading the 14-piece band, it was a sparkling evening of entertainment and reveré.

Through the audience you kept hearing the words, "He's good!" Add enthusiastic applause, a house clearly in Hawking's hands, a standing ovation and long, long lines waiting to have the baritone autograph "HIS WAY" compact discs, and the evening was a great success for the Norris Theatre. And what a treat it was for the audience.

Hawking started performing his tribute "His Way" in 1998. It made a splash then, and it's believable that the splash could turn into a major wave of popularity. It's easy to imagine Hawking booked into Las Vegas' New York, New York for as long as he'd care to run with his tribute to Sinatra, "HIS WAY."

Meanwhile, the Chicago-based Hawking is off to San Diego, then, poor baby, he'll have to go to another warm climate. He's been booked at The Breakers in Palm Beach.

Clearly, the Norris audience wants him booked back in St. Charles.

# Frankly, this tribute to Sinatra swings

By BOB WILBRANDT

**R**on Hawking, now starring in "His Way" at the Arlington Heights Metropolis Performing Arts Center, grew up on the North Side of Chicago and began his entertainment career as the voice of Charlie the Tuna.

## REVIEW

He earned his living by impersonating celebrities while hawking numerous products on countless TV ads. Commercials

provided a secure income for the fortysomething comedian, and he might have just relaxed and enjoyed life's comforts. But he didn't.

Hawking, who now lives in Barrington Hills, was smitten by two unique Chicago North Side influences: a love for the Cubs, and a love for all things Sinatra. For the Cubs, he wrote a song about Sammy Sosa and sang it at Wrigley.

For Frank Sinatra, he created an entire musical revue, backed it with his own money, brought Las Vegas veteran Bill Rogers on board to direct a big band orchestra, and wove it all together with his own wacky and spot-on impressions of "rat pack"

celebrities to create an hour-and-a-half musical tribute to the Chairman of the Board.

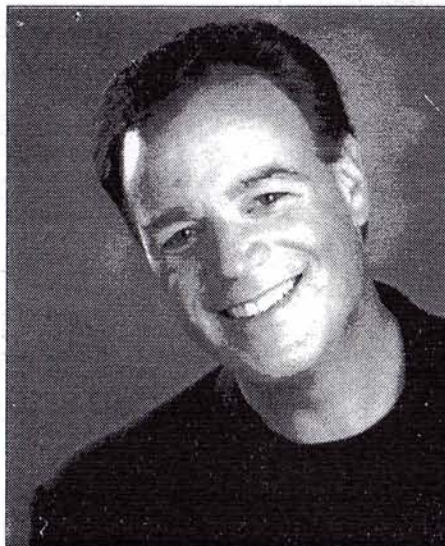
This is not an impersonator show.

"I look nothing like Frank Sinatra," Hawking tells his audience, and in fact he looks more like Mayor Daley in a black tuxedo than Ol' Blue Eyes.

Instead, Hawking claims to be a musical messenger from a bygone era. It was an era of swing bands and crooners and tinkling ice in glasses set on tables where small lamps pierced a smoky haze.

It was an era of casino lounge acts and saloon singers and cigarette girls and the Las Vegas Sands Hotel. It was, most of all, the era of Frank Sinatra. And if you close your eyes and dream a little, Hawking's show can take you there.

Most of Sinatra's standards from his Capitol Records years are here, including "Come Fly With Me", "Let's Fall in Love", "I've Got You Under My Skin", and the Chicago favorite, "My



Hawking

Kind of Town."

Hawking performs them all with a fine baritone voice. While he lacks the Chairman's velvety tonal quality, the songs work because Hawking, like Sinatra, sells them so well.

But what makes this revue unique is Hawking's uncanny knack for outrageously funny celebrity impressions. A heavenly reunion

is set "really, really upstairs" at the Sands, and Sinatra's friends check in.

For Dean Martin, heaven is a full glass and boozy lyrics. For Sammy Davis Jr., it includes a gold medallion and a chance to dance "Bojangles." George Burns descends and wisecracks with Carol Channing, Johnny Mathis, Louie Armstrong, and Jack Nicholson. It's all great fun.

Band leader Bill Rogers played with Sinatra in Vegas, and his current eight-piece swing ensemble is simply outstanding. They switch tempos and moods with lightning speed, and their accompaniment is both crisp and understated.

Mike Hegel, switching from synthesizer to piano, provides the intricate keyboard work on "Quarter to Three — Set 'Em Up Joe" that makes the number a musical highlight.

The intimate Metropolis Performing Arts Center provides just the right setting for this latter-day lounge act, but the opening weekend performance was marred by a few sound and equipment issues. Mr. Hawking covered well, but hopefully the microphone pops and feedback squeals will be remedied as the run progresses.

If you're interested in but unfamiliar with the pop music of composers like Sammy Cahn, Cole Porter, Jimmy Van Heusen, Harold Arlen and George Gershwin, this show provides a wonderful introduction. And if you grew up with these classics in the lounges and casino bars of yesterday, then the Metropolis presentation of "His Way" will provide a memorable and swinging good time without the temptation of slot machines in the lobby.

*"His Way: A Tribute to the Man and His Music" continues through Aug. 18 at the Metropolis Theater, 111 W. Campbell St., Arlington Heights, with performances at 7:30 p.m. Fridays, 6 p.m. Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays. Tickets are \$34. Call (847) 577-2121.*





Barrington resident Ron Hawking (center photo), star of "His Way — A Tribute to The Man and His Music," is celebrating a year's anniversary performing at Chicago's NBC Tower.

## Hawking sings Sinatra 'His Way'

BY LILLI KUZMA  
CONTRIBUTOR

**T**o be perfectly frank, Barrington resident Ron Hawking doesn't exactly want to be Frank Sinatra, that is. As the star of the critically-acclaimed show, "His Way — A Tribute to The Man and His Music," Hawking sings as himself, not as a Sinatra impersonator.

"His Way" is a nod to Frank, a tribute to the man and his songs, and to a wonderful era," said Hawking. "I sing the songs as they were meant to be sung. But there could never be another Frank Sinatra."

While he has chosen not to impersonate Ol' Blue Eyes, Hawking, an accomplished impressionist with over 100 "voices" in his repertoire, does feature some legendary characters in his show.

This is a change from the original incarnation of the "His Way" show which began at the Mercury Theatre in 1998.

"Surprise guests will appear," said Robin Cecola, the show's Executive Producer, also of Barrington. "The 'His Way' show has evolved and matured. Advanced characterizations and comedy have been incorporated. But the core of the show remains the same, presenting the great material of Frank Sinatra."

An eight-piece ensemble provides a Big Band feel and sound on the grand stage.

The show is unique in another way, too. For the past year, "His Way" has been presented in its own specially-designed venue in the space formerly occupied by the "Jenny Jones Show." Known now as the His Way Theatre at NBC Tower, the new design is a salute to the Copa Room in Las Vegas.

Adding to the experience, "His Way" attendees walk through "NBC Memory Lane", and through the NBC television studios to get to the His Way Theatre.

"There's no theatre like this inside of a real working television studio anywhere in the country, maybe in the world," said Cecola.

Indeed, the 5,000-square foot room offers a range of plush seating, from cabaret-style tables near the stage, to V.I.P. booths, love seats and crushed red velvet chairs. Specialty martinis named after stars like Dean Martin can be sipped during the show, making the overall ambience a real throwback to a more elegant time.

"I've always loved the era," said Hawking, "the black-and-white movies, the nightclubs, the cigars, the martinis."

Although he grew up with influences ranging from Simon and Garfunkel to The Rolling Stones, Hawking said Sinatra was "always

around."

"I had an uncle that listened to Sinatra, and I can't remember a time when the music wasn't in my life," he said.

Always a performer, Hawking studied piano as a child, then later played guitar and bass. He has been in rock bands and jazz trios. Nicknamed "the Chameleon" for his incredible talent with voices, Hawking has done extensive studio recording. He has also been a jingle singer, even doing the famous voice of "Charlie Tuna."

Hawking previously performed a show called "The Wonderful World of Impressions" and, before that, "First Impressions." He has also done a "Billy Joel-like" variety show playing both piano and guitar.

But it was having all those "voices" that made it a challenge to find his own true voice.

"I didn't want to be just an impressionist," Hawking said with feeling, "I wanted to find my own voice."

Hawking had experimented with the Sinatra library in the late '80's, and had sung with the Dorsey Band when they were in Chicago. A cancer survivor, Hawking had intended to do a Sinatra show in 1996, but was sidelined by his chemotherapy. The "His Way" show opened just two months after Frank Sinatra passed

away in 1998.

Hawking recalled watching Sinatra on a "Larry King Live" show taped shortly before Sinatra's death.

"Sinatra was saying how he hoped his music would endure, how he hoped somebody would carry the torch after he was gone," said Hawking.

"I never would presume to be the next Frank Sinatra," he said, "but I have found my voice in his music. It's a perfect fit for me. Be happy, feel good, that's the aim of my show. And it's a chance for people to relive a time they grew up in, or for younger people who never had a chance to see Sinatra."

The "His Way" show attracts all ages, but Hawking noted that a sizable part of the audience is in the 20- to 30-something range.

"The whole experience is hip again," he said, "what's old is new."

A special holiday version of "His Way" has just started, incorporating classics like "White Christmas," as well as a Hawking original, "Christmas in the Copa Room Upstairs," at the His Way Theatre at NBC Tower, 454 N. Columbus Drive, Chicago. For show information and tickets, call (312) 222-1188 or visit [www.hiswaytheatre.com](http://www.hiswaytheatre.com)

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## On the town

Ron Hawking  
found his voice  
singing tunes  
Frank Sinatra  
made famous

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# On the town

CHICAGO

BROADWAY

SAN FRANCISCO

The Road to  
Broadway

## Finding his way

Frank Sinatra helped Ron Hawking  
develop his own voice

BY BARBARA VITELLO  
Daily Herald Staff Writer

Voice-over artist and studio musician Ron Hawking disappeared in his work. The Chicago native was so skilled at adapting to whatever style the gig demanded, even his colleagues didn't know his real voice.

Neither did he. "It was almost a curse," Hawking said, "I couldn't figure out what I wanted to do." For inspiration, he looked to Frank Sinatra. The result was "His Way, A Tribute to the Man and His Music," Hawking's long-running showcase returning Saturday to the His

Way Theatre in the NBC Tower. While the title acknowledges the man who inspired it, the show is all Hawking.

Hawking started singing as a child and as a young man, played in bands here and on the road. Eventually, he established himself singing jingles and impersonating famous voices, another skill he picked up as a youngster.

His talent for mimicry surfaced when he was about 10, when he imitated Louis Armstrong's voice after hearing his father (who also had an ear for voices) impersonate the jazz great.

Years later, his impression of Armstrong landed him his first paying voice-over job. In time, his repertoire grew to include Jimmy Durante, Nat King Cole, Charlie the Tuna and others, whose voices he impersonated in ads for Kellogg's, Hershey's and Starkist.

"I'm very fortunate," said Hawking, who studied acting in New York City and improvisation in Chicago. "I've never had to wait on a table in my life."

The 1989 romantic comedy "When Harry Met Sally" inspired the singer to create a big band show, a la Sinatra, but a diagnosis of Hodgkin's Disease in 1995 forced him to put his plans on hold.

"I was on the ropes," he said. While undergoing chemotherapy, he vowed that if he got a second chance, he'd pursue his dream. "The Pack is Back," a 1996 tribute to Sinatra's famed Rat Pack, gave him the opportunity. After three months, the show went on a two-week hiatus. Hawking didn't return. Instead, he began work on "His Way."

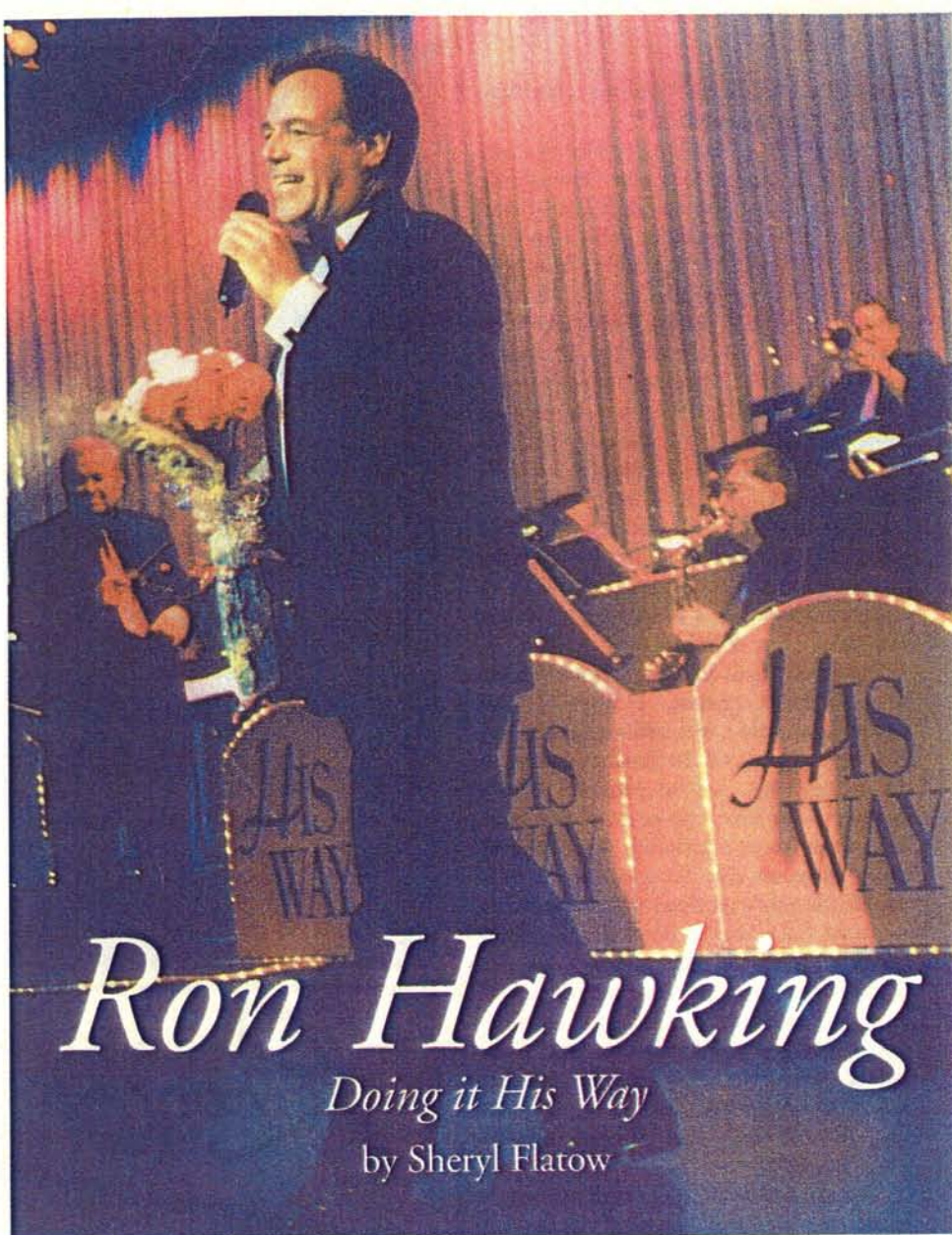
Hawking describes the show as a musically varied homage to the crooner's style, rhythm and attitude, *not* an impersonation.

"If you think you're coming to see a Frank Sinatra impression, you're going to be disappointed," said the entertainer, who recorded

See HAWKING on PAGE 16



Ron Hawking's "His Way, A Tribute to the Man and His Music" returns Saturday.  
DANIEL WHITE/DAILY HERALD



# Ron Hawking

*Doing it His Way*

by Sheryl Flatow

**I**t takes a lot of confidence, a lot of talent, and more than a touch of *chutzpah* for an unknown performer to rent a theater, hire a band, and create, produce, and star in a show celebrating Frank Sinatra and the songs most closely associated with him. Comparisons are inevitable, and it would seem virtually impossible to compete with a legend, with one of the most enduring, influential, and popular singers of the 20th century. Besides, why would people go to the theater to hear some stranger perform Sinatra standards, when they could turn on the CD player at home and hear those same numbers sung by the Chairman of the Board himself?

Ron Hawking heard that very question when he first got the idea for a Sinatra tribute. "People told me, 'You don't have any marquee value,'" he says. "'Who's gonna come and see you?'"

But Hawking would not be deterred. When he couldn't interest producers in his native Chicago to back the show, he demonstrated Sinatra-like moxie and capitalized the venture himself. *His Way — A Tribute to the Man and His Music* opened last July at the Mercury Theater in Chicago for a scheduled six-week run. It closed eight months later, after packing in audiences of all ages, spawning a CD of the same name, and garnering accolades. "A contagious labor of love," said one critic. "A first-class piece of entertainment," said another.

Now the Sinatra legacy is being invoked onstage in San Francisco, where *His Way* has settled into the Theatre on the Square. From the moment Hawking takes off with "Come Fly With Me," it's easy to understand why he and the show have caught on. He is not doing a Sinatra imitation — although he could, impersonation being

one of his talents. Instead, he brings his own appealing baritone and affable presence to the music, somehow managing to conjure up memories of Ol' Blue Eyes without obliterating his own personality. The big-band arrangements are new, but were clearly inspired by the arrangements of Nelson Riddle, Gordon Jenkins, and other memorable Sinatra colleagues, so that the sound is reassuringly familiar but not a mere replica. And Hawking uses his gifts as an impersonator to bring to life a host of celebrities, including Sinatra's Rat Pack cronies, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis, Jr.

"It took a tremendous amount of courage to do this show," says Hawking, "because I didn't want people to think I was riding on the coattails of Frank Sinatra. It's not a cheesy, Frank Sinatra-impersonator show. He sang the great American Songbook, by all the greatest composers, lyricists, and arrangers, and I'm interpreting them my own way. I'm not trying to be Frank. I don't want to be Frank. I'm the messenger helping the audience to remember Frank Sinatra, his friends, and his music. And I chose to do it in a theater, because the theater is a special place."

Although *His Way* premiered two months after Sinatra died last May, the idea originally came to Hawking two years earlier, upon the death of another show-business icon, Gene Kelly. "I was much more affected by Kelly's death than I thought I would be," says Hawking. "When I heard the news on the radio that he had passed on, I thought about what he represented to me, and how we had reached that moment in time when we were going to be losing all these wonderful people. Then I started thinking about Frank Sinatra, knowing that he wouldn't be singing forever. And I thought, 'Doing a tribute to Sinatra would be such an interesting project.' That's when the wheels began turning."

A show-business veteran, the 45-year-old Hawking has worked as an opening act for headliners including Carol Channing and The Temptations, performed in concert, and entertained at corporate events. But Hawking has spent much of his 25-plus year career in recording studios, as his special talent to do all kinds of voices and his uncanny ability to mimic just about anybody has made him one of the most sought-after jingle singers and voice-over artists in the country. His commercial repertoire includes Jimmy Durante (for Kellogg's Frosted Mini Wheats), Louis Armstrong (Citizen Watch), Ritchie

# A Breezy Tribute to Ol' Blue Eyes

Hawking's 'His Way'  
evokes Sinatra's best

By James Sullivan  
CHRONICLE STAFF CRITIC

**F**rank Sinatra was called many things in his time. Modest was not one of them.

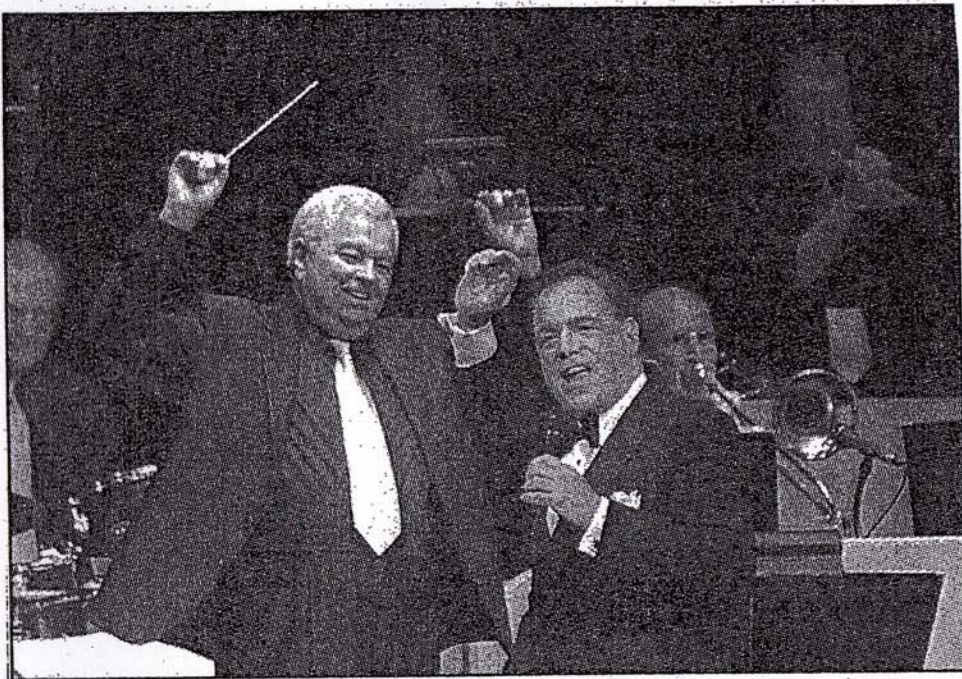
Oddly, modesty is the very quality that makes Ron Hawking's "His Way: A Tribute to the Man and His Music" breeze along like a summer wind. The homage, fresh from a sold-out run in Hawking's hometown of Chicago, began a six-week engagement Tuesday at the Theatre on the Square.

## CABARET REVIEW

Hawking, a career voice-over artist who once sang "Witchcraft" for a Revlon commercial, says he's not a Sinatra impersonator. He takes his phrasing cues from the Chairman — "down to Ock-Apulco Bay," he stylized on the opening tune, "Come Fly With Me" — but he makes little attempt to mimic the Voice.

His own vocal instrument is distinct mostly for its utility. Unlike Sinatra, who took immeasurable pride in his gruff Hoboken edges, Hawking tamps down whatever Chicago inflections he may have.

On Tuesday, his skill was clearly his deference to his hero's material: Like an expert matador, he coaxed the bravado from the Sinatra catalog and then stepped aside, letting the songs burst forth.



DEANNE FITZMAURICE / The Chronicle

Ron Hawking (right) performed "His Way: A Tribute to a Man and His Music," a theatrical salute to Frank Sinatra, as Bill Rogers conducted at Theatre on the Square.

Conducted by Bill Rogers, a Las Vegas veteran who played trombone with Sinatra and has done some arranging for Frank Jr., the 14-piece His Way Orchestra provided Hawking with lively, perfectly calibrated backing. On familiar numbers such as "I Get a Kick Out of You," the band swung on a dime; on the wistful ballad "It Was a Very Good Year," flutes sniffled over muted brass.

Hawking, who looks a lot like Chicago's Mayor Richard M. Daley, adopted Sinatra's trademark fedora for certain numbers. He was dressed throughout in black tie and tux, making his only other costuming concession during his comic interludes, when he let down his guard with the kind of broad

humor associated with Sinatra.

"That was either Willie Nelson or Heidi," he said after yanking a braids-and-bandanna ensemble over his head. The song, "Come Rain or Come Shine," was "His Way's" version of Sinatra's "Duets" albums, Hawking said — an opportunity to impersonate Nelson, Ray Charles and Tom Jones. His overheated hip-thrust on the latter drew one of the night's most enthusiastic responses.

Later, on "The Lady Is a Tramp," he acknowledged Sinatra's singular knack for slang improvisation: "She loves that free, fresh, knockdown cool wind in her wig," he

## PERFORMANCE

## Sinatra tribute show is a labor of love

By Pat Craig  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

First of all, this isn't an impersonation — not a sweaty guy in a Vegas tux trying to clone Frank Sinatra.

It is a tribute to Sinatra, at least to begin with. But, beyond that, it's a tribute to the music, to the spirit imbued in both the songs and the singer, and an era that is typified by Ol' Blue Eyes.

"It's something I started thinking

about right after Gene Kelly died — I thought, my goodness, these larger-than-life icons aren't going to be here any more at some point," says Ron Hawking, who is bringing his Sinatra tribute to San Francisco following an eight-month Chicago run. "After that, I also realized Frank Sinatra was not going to be able to do what he does forever, and I thought about how much fun it would be to keep this music and this format going. But I didn't want to be riding on Frank

Sinatra's coattails. I figured my talent as a singer and entertainer are enough to do it on my own."

So Hawking put things together his way, commissioning new arrangements of some of the songs associated with Sinatra. The goal was to create a sound and a presence that would pay homage to the singer, but not copy him.

"I orchestrated the song book, put the melodies together, selected all the music, and created a show that keeps

the same panache of a Sinatra chart, but, at the same time, made it my own," he says. "Essentially, I'm singing my own arrangements and interpreting the music as my own."

Hawking was assembling the show during a time of transition in his own life. He was recovering from successful chemotherapy for cancer, and had joined the cast of a Rat Pack impersonation show to get his stage legs back.

The man had been a performer for more than a quarter-century, but the chemo left him basically flat on his back for almost a year, and most of his previous performing had been anonymous, as a studio singer.

As the voice of hundreds of commercials, Hawking had developed a flair for impersonations. He supplied the voice of Charlie the Tuna, and was Jimmy Durante for Kellogg's, Louis Armstrong for Citizen Watch, Louis Prima for Progresso Soups, Ritchie Valens for Subaru and Nat King Cole for Hershey's chocolate.

He lapses easily into the Prima voice, singing the soup song and talking about the part of the show where he does impersonations, of Sinatra and the Rat Pack in one segment, and a host of others, ranging from Ray Charles to Jack Nicholson, when he performs his own tribute to Sinatra's "Duets" albums.

Hawking agrees his timing for the show was great, because it fits into the current retro trend of martinis and swing. But the product, itself, is

## PREVIEW

WHAT: "His Way, a Tribute to the Man and His Music," by Ron Hawking

WHERE: Theatre on the Square, 450 Post, San Francisco

WHEN: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays, 8:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 3 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, 7 p.m. Sundays through July 11 (previews tonight-Sunday, opens Tuesday)

HOW MUCH: \$25 during previews, then \$25-\$40

CALL: 415-433-9500 or 762-BASS

hardly trendy.

With music and lyrics by the likes of Cole Porter, the Gershwins and Rodgers and Hart, Hawking's act contains some of the most well-wrought music of all time. Combine that with a full orchestra (he's using many of the same musicians Sinatra used when he visited this area), and you have a special event.

That's why performing it in a theater is so important to him.

"This music is very special; you almost want to put in on display under a microscope," he says. "I've taken it to the theater because I wanted to take it back to its genesis. I'm very passionate about this music; it touches a chord in me. It's not just the words, but the feeling behind the words."



RON HAWKING has created a Frank Sinatra tribute show for audiences in San Francisco.

# Salute to Sinatra works superbly

## Ron Hawking puts his own mark on crooner's oeuvre

By Philip Elwood  
EXAMINER MUSIC CRITIC

CALLING his theatrical musical salute to Frank Sinatra "His Way — A Tribute to the Man and His Music," singer Ron Hawking might well have seen his show stutter and stall during its opening run in his native Chicago last summer had he merely imitated Sinatra's singing of a batch of tried-and-true material.

But as he demonstrated from the first notes of "Come Fly With Me," at Tuesday night's opening of the show at the Theatre On The Square, Hawking is by no means an imitator, although he is a great admirer of Sinatra's style and of the material he seemed to make his own.

Hawking, who wrote this show, manages to cover, more or less, about 30 songs in the two-hour concert, some of them in a "Movie Medley," others in a "Rat Pack in the Copa Room" routine, the rest in full-blown renditions.

The performance is simply a knock-out, a remarkably effective and emotional production that treats numbers from the Sinatra songbook inimitably and with distinction. Hawking hasn't Sinatra's voice, but he has a good one of his own; he occasionally phrases and punctuates like Sinatra (as on "I get a kick out of you," or "I have got you under my skin") but that, after all, is inevitable when you're dealing with a pied piper like Sinatra.

Hawking floats through his program like a guy singing in the shower, comfortably tossing various lyric references into traditional renditions without losing momentum or mood. His insertion of "I've Got the World on a String" into "It Was a Very Good Year," which he had already treated as "September Song," proved a brilliant idea.

Hawking is a bit shorter than

Sinatra and doesn't look or move like him, but nevertheless he creates a Sinatra image as he sings. As he works his way through Vernon Duke's magnificent "Autumn in New York," Hawking cleverly slips in a portion of Bob Hilliard's, "Wee Small Hours of the Morning." After the "Copa Room" sequence, which he brackets with "Angel Eyes," he shifts into a calypso rhythm and has the audience wiggling to another Hilliard number, "The Coffee Song" (aka "They've Got an Awful Lot of Coffee in Brazil").

Hawking has, as did Sinatra, an obvious respect and admiration for the band that backs him. Conductor Bill Rogers, who worked with both Sinatra senior and Sinatra junior, orchestrated the music for the show and I found his arrangements to be hotter, crisper and generally more appropriate for the

swinging Sinatra-Hawking style than Nelson Riddle's were 45 years ago. Particularly notable is veteran drummer Bob Chmel, who kicks the band along at a great rate.

Hawking sings "Come Rain or Come Shine" in a number of styles (Ray Charles, Willie Nelson, Tom Jones, others), calling the whole affair his "duet sequence." The "Copa Room" segment displays Hawking's skill as an impressionist as he renders familiar songs in the vocal manner of Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr. and Sinatra.

His concluding numbers — "His Way" and "New York, New York" are impressively presented all 'round.

"His Way" plays Tuesdays through Sundays at the Theatre On The Square, 450 Post St., through July 11. Box Office: (415) 346-7805 or BASS Tickets.



Ron Hawking's tribute to Frank Sinatra benefits well-done band arrangements.



RON HAWKING, right, offers a loving, swinging tribute to Frank Sinatra with "His Way" at the Theatre on the Square in San Francisco.

# 'His Way' tribute does right by Sinatra

By Pat Craig  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Two things:

Ron Hawking is a terrifically engaging showman.

And:

He has given solo performance a new twist that blends entertainment with the far fringes of religion.

It's not the sort of religion that would lead the singer to get his own cable station and make apocalyptic prophecies. The gospel according to Hawking centers on Frank Sinatra and celebrates wee hours and liquor and all the other adult pleasures that have been lost to early bedtimes, long commutes and four-figure mortgages.

Perhaps it begins with the bandstand, where several signs read, "His Way," with an enormous capital H, that lead you to briefly think of, well, Him.

Of course you soon find out the capital-H "Him" in this case is Sinatra and to be fair, there are those

## THEATER REVIEW

■ **WHAT:** "His Way — A Tribute to the Man and His Music," by Ron Hawking

■ **WHERE:** Theatre on the Square, 450 Post St., S.F.

■ **WHEN:** 8 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 8:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, 7 p.m. Sunday

■ **HOW MUCH:** \$25-\$40

■ **CALL:** 415-433-9500 or BASS outlets

of brief times in the show), it is really more delightful to hear the man ring-a-ding-ding his way through the Sinatra songbook, from "Come Fly With Me" to "My Way" in his own voice.

So that would make Hawking the pastor of this Little Church of the Big Room, where he is charged with de-

town for a while.

What Hawking does so terribly well is recreate a time and place, using what are probably the best songs ever created in America, and the spirit of the man who delivered them with the sort of panache and pizzazz they deserve.

And can he ever sell a song. Capturing the "tough guy with a heart of mush" persona of Sinatra, Hawking pushes the tunes to the max, making you wish Las Vegas still had its big showrooms, and the world had the personalities to fill them. He has an engaging way with a ballad, which showed especially well with "Autumn in New York," and can punch an up-tempo with the best of them.

In another time, Hawking would have stepped into the big room all by himself, not worrying about basking in the shadow of Sinatra.

It's a different matter at the end, however. Through sheer force of talent and personality, and OK, great

Hawking is doing is presenting fairly basic entertainment — the saloon singer, sans saloon — and helping us remember why we liked it in the first place.

And he works hard, too, doing the songs, along with impersonations ranging from the Rat Pack to Tony Bennett and Carol Channing. He's even tossed in a couple of songs of his own — tributes to the Chairman and show business past.

But best of all, he's packaged it into a lively two hours that is at once nostalgic, contemporary, and thoroughly entertaining.

# Skyline

37th Year

February 10, 2005

28 Pages

## HEART OF THE 'HOOD

### Sinatra tribute will put a song in your heart

Wanna make your Valentine red-hot for you? Take him or her to see Ron Hawking's filled-with-heart show, "His Way, A Tribute to The Man and His Music," at the His Way Theater in the NBC Tower, 454 N. Columbus Drive.

I took my husband for his birthday last weekend to the 300-seat Art Deco theater, which with its cabaret seating and elegant, red velvet chairs, is a romantic throwback to the Copa Room at the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas. Not only did I love what they've done to the theater, but I spent a sweet evening with Ol' Blue Eyes, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Ray Charles, Jack Nicholson (yea, he slips a non-musical Jack impression in there), Carol Channing, and some other famous people.

And love and romance are sure to be in the air at Hawking's pre-Valentine show this weekend, when he'll add a few more love songs than usual to his repertoire, give the women flowers, and set up special dance areas for those feeling like cuttin' a little rug!

Hawking's producer, Robin Cecola, calls it, "a place to come and experience love."

"It's corny, but we have fun with it," Cecola said. "It's a glamorous evening at the theater."

Hawking, who is working with the Chicago Convention and Tourism Bureau to make the show a destination spot for tourists, came up with the show's concept after both Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly died. "It hit me that here was an era of great performers who weren't going to around," he said. "I thought it would be fun to put together a show as a tribute to Frank Sinatra."

Yet Hawking's show is much more than just Sinatra. He performs classic songs by various composers, some comedic schtick, and, awesome impressions, which he started doing as a kid. My favorite of the night was Dean Martin. ("That's Amore," this weekend maybe?)

Hawking's talent and that of his band will steal your heart for sure.

"All of this comes from my heart, and I feel that what comes from my heart goes to the heart of the audience," Hawking said (as we were talking about Valentine's Day). "It's heartfelt...and if you deliver something from your heart and it's believable, the audience will accept it."

So go out and paint the town red by checking out the show. And be sure to do as its program suggests: "Sit back, enjoy a cocktail or two and let the music take you away to a time not so long ago when music was big and brassy, and the fabulous, tuxedo-clad crooner in the spotlight made all your cares disappear."

Your Valentine will love you for it.



By Felicia Dechter

## BILL ZWECKER



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# Sinatra's music fresh as ever for Hawking

**I**t's hard to believe Ron Hawking has been performing "His Way: A Tribute to the Man and His Music" for nearly seven years — first at the Mercury Theater on Southport, and for the past two years in Hawking's special cabaret venue at NBC Tower.

And amazingly, Hawking speaks today of his homage to Frank Sinatra with the same enthusiasm he had when he dreamed up his show in the wake of Ol' Blue Eyes' death in 1998 at age 82.

"There is as much of a demand for this music — maybe more — as when it was first created," says Hawking, a onetime TV commercial voice-over artist. "Call it nostalgia, call it coming full circle, I don't know if I can totally explain it, but people just seem inherently drawn to the kind of music Frank and Sammy [Davis, Jr.] and Dean [Martin] were doing in Vegas more than 40 years ago."

Sitting at what has come to be known as **Tony Bennett's** table in the front corner window at Alex Dana's Rosebud on Rush, Hawking ordered a Bennett favorite (angel hair pasta with marinara sauce) as he talked about his show, his idols (including Bennett) and how he keeps it fresh, night after night.

**BIGGEST SURPRISE:** The Chicago native expected some repeat customers, but says he has been blown away by the large number who show up "not just one or two times, but sometimes six or seven — even a dozen times."

The singer and comedian thinks it's not *just* because they like the old standards, but the way he delivers them. Don't call him a Sinatra "impressionist" — that's guaranteed to make a cloud cross his



Ron Hawking stresses that "His Way" is not an impersonator show. "I'm here to reinterpret and redeliver music from the past," he says.

**BUT HE DOES DO 'EM:** A big part of "His Way's" success is tied to Hawking's dead-on recreations of Dean Martin (complete with boozy lyrics), Sammy Davis Jr. (dancing to "Bojangles") or a wise-cracking George Burns. During our Rosebud on Rush lunch, Hawking had waiters doing double takes as he effortlessly slipped into the voice of Johnny Carson.

As a voice-over artist, Hawking has impersonated Louis Armstrong for Citizen watches, Jimmy Durante for Kellogg's Frosted Mini-Wheats, sung "Unforgettable" as Nat "King" Cole for Hershey, Louis Prima for Progresso soups and, most memorably, played Charlie the Tuna for Starkist.

**NOT TOO DATED?** In an era of hip-hop and rap music, why does



# weekend

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE | DEC 15, 2004 | N

## Hawking's way: elegant and festive

BY MIRIAM DI NUNZIO  
Staff Reporter

Nestled away in a corner of the second floor of the NBC Tower is one of the coolest ways to enjoy an evening of first-class entertainment this holiday season. And what a joy it is to discover the elegant His Way Theatre and "Ron Hawking — His Way, a Tribute to the Man and His Music."

A throwback to the golden age of nightclub entertainment when people actually dressed up for a night out on the town, the show features Hawking, an endearing entertainer and man of a thousand voices, clad in tuxedo and backed by a jumpin' 15-piece big band, expertly navigating the songbooks of Cole Porter, the Gershwins, Jimmy Van Heusen and the like.

While the show celebrates the music made famous by Frank Sinatra, Hawking is not impersonating the legend (save for one special number). And that's precisely

### MUSIC REVIEW

#### 'RON HAWKING — HIS WAY, A TRIBUTE TO THE MAN AND HIS MUSIC'

#### HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

**When:** Open run

**Where:** His Way Theatre, NBC Tower, 454 N. Columbus

**Tickets:** \$48.50-\$98.50

**Call:** (800) 882-4275

why the show works.

Hawking knows how to work a room and fill it with great songs blessed with big, brassy arrangements of favorites such as "The Tender Trap," "Luck Be a Lady," "I've Got You Under My Skin," "My Kind of Town" and "New York New York." He's equally adept at turning the tempo way

down with a gentle piano solo on "Send in the Clowns" (perhaps the only version of this song ever worth listening to).

For the special holiday incarnation of the program, Hawking offers up classics such as "The Most Wonderful Time of the Year," "White Christmas" (on which he duets with himself as Bing Crosby) and "The Christmas Song" (Hawking provides the vocals for both Nat and Natalie Cole). There's also a nicely done segment called "Up in the Copa Room," Hawking's sweet and hugely entertaining tribute to the Rat Pack that finds him doing some pretty right-on impressions of Frank, Dean and Sammy.

But it's Hawking's own vocals and marvelous interpretation of the music (arranged by former Sinatra bandmate Bill Rogers) that will have you snapping your fingers and tapping your feet, and wondering why a city of this size doesn't have more of this brand of vibrant and very "grown-up" style of nightclub life.



Ron Hawking's holiday show celebrates songs made famous by Frank Sinatra. "Ron Hawking — His Way, a Tribute to the Man and His Music" is at the His Way Theatre in the NBC Tower. —DOM NAJOLIA/SUN-TIMES

# Arts Watch

## Ron Hawking is completely Frank

By Lawrence Bommer  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

**R**on Hawking is not, he says, a Frank Sinatra impersonator. Hawking call himself a "musical messenger" who salutes America's balladeer in "my own style." Well, as the Brits say, it's a difference without a distinction. The cheers that greet "His Way — A Tribute to the Man and His Music," a perfectly produced retrospective at the Mercury Theatre, acknowledge one small or big triumph: Hawking really does capture, if not clone, the painstakingly effortless crooning of the once and future Chairman of the Board.

A notable jingle singer and voice-over artist and a veteran of the nostalgia-mongering revue "The Pack Is Back," Hawking is a sincere showman in his own right. He knows he can't replace or revive Old Blue Eyes. But, superbly backed up by Sinatra arranger Bill Rogers and his unimprovable 14-piece orchestra, Hawking still conjures up the loose-limbed grace of "World on a String," the 3 a.m. heartbreak of "One for My Baby," and the classy verve of "My Kind of

### Theater review

"His Way — A Tribute to the Man and His Music"

When: Through Aug. 16

Where: Mercury Theater, 3745 N. Southport Ave..

Phone: 773-325-1700

Town."

No question, Sinatra set the standard for the standards. Imitating him is the pop singer's quest for the Holy Grail—and requires a similar selflessness. If you do it well, you efface yourself before another guy's legend. It's still his way. You tip your hat and take your chances.

When Hawking launches a movie medley ("Young at Heart" remains just that), accompanied by stills from Sinatra films, or single-voicedly recreates the Rat Pack (complete with a bibulous Dino and a soaring Sammy), the reproduction is no slavish simulation. A contagious labor of love, "His Way" salutes, not just Sinatra's showbiz savvy, but the pure pleasure of pizzazz.

Hawking's awesome mimicry

goes beyond the Rat Pack. His hit-and-run impressions of Jimmy Durante, Ray Charles, Willie Nelson, Bing Crosby, Tony Bennett, Carol Channing, Johnny Mathis, Louis Armstrong and George Burns come creepily close to channelling.

But it's the Sinatra stylings that make Hawking's imitation the proverbial compliment and give a new meaning to "Witchcraft." With his hat at the requisite jaunty angle, his casual byplay with conductor Rogers as confident as the real thing, and his smile on overdrive, Hawking is working/playing to make sure we're present at the creation. It works: Despite some tight squeezes on the high notes, "All The Way," "Fly Me to the Moon," and "I've Got You Under My Skin" come close enough for comfort. It's not a question of turning back the clock: These memories are always in the present tense.

A quibble: The program offers no individual credits for the terrific songs by the Gershwins, Cole Porter, Harold Arlen, Sammy Cahn and Jimmy Van Heusen, the alchemists who spun the gold that Sinatra mined. It was their way too.



# Chicago Tribune

FINAL

50¢ City & Suburbs; 75¢ Elsewhere

September 12, 2003

NORTHWEST

## MUSIC REVIEW

# Sinatra gets space in his kind of town

By Howard Reich  
Tribune arts critic

Toward the end of his life, Frank Sinatra told friends that he believed he had performed in Chicago more often than anywhere else in his career, which spanned a glorious seven decades.

So perhaps it's fitting that an unusually elegant tribute to America's greatest popular singer should emerge in the heart of this city, just a few blocks south of the long-gone Chez Paree, one of many storied Chicago rooms that became famous simply because Sinatra sang there.

Five years after Sinatra died, at age 82, his music is ennobling a new room in a decidedly high-profile location: NBC Tower. One hardly could think of a more buoyant way to unveil a potentially important downtown venue than with Chicago singer Ron Hawking's breezy, utterly disarming homage, "His Way: A Tribute to the Man and His Music."

Even before Hawking sings a note, however, it's the setting that captures one's attention. The walk through the NBC lobby may not convey quite the opulence of, say, New York's Rockefeller Center, which once attracted audiences to its shuttered Rainbow and Stars cabaret. But it's surprisingly close.

A brief elevator ride and a short walk take listeners to the His Way Theatre, a fanciful name for the space that once housed the considerably less tony "Jenny Jones Show." To their credit,

the producers of "His Way" have erased all traces of Jones' little circus, providing instead gently raked, theater-style seating, plus a couple dozen cabaret tables topped by those tiny, glowing lamps that are indispensable for this kind of place. In all, the theater feels like an unusually intimate version of a classic Las Vegas showroom (seating about 300).

None of the unabashedly retro ambience would amount to very much, however, if the music weren't top-notch, which it is.

Yet it's important to note that Hawking's performance is not a Sinatra impression but, rather, one bona fide artist's tip of the hat to another. Hawking's phrasings, tempos and tone colors are significantly different than the ones Sinatra devotees will recall from the fabled recordings and celebrated concerts.

Perhaps more important, Hawking, who enjoyed considerable commercial and critical success when he staged this show at the Mercury Theatre in the late 1990s, sounds in better voice than ever. And though a little tweaking would make a strong performance even more effective, there's no question that Hawking is thriving in this setting.

At his best, he strikes a delicate balance between Sinatra's repertoire and his own, post-Sinatra perspective on it. Listen to Hawking take an unexpectedly relaxed pace on "Come Fly With Me" or hit an aggressive, uptempo swing style in the refrain of "The Way You Look Tonight," and it's clear that Hawking has his own,



Tribune photo by Nuccio DiNuzzo

Ron Hawking pays tribute to Frank Sinatra Wednesday at His Way Theatre in the NBC Tower.

thoroughly persuasive way of addressing Sinatra's tunes.

The eight-piece band that accompanies him, led by the indispensable Bill Rogers, brings a terrific jazz feeling to its arrangements, though one hopes that eventually the ensemble can be expanded to better capture the big-band sensibility that defined so much of Sinatra's music. Moreover, if Hawking cut back on his impressions of other entertainers and instead delved

into the less familiar reaches of Sinatra's repertoire, he could deepen the import of his show.

These are minor caveats, however, in an entertainment that surely will play for months to come—and deserves to.

Hawking's "His Way: A Tribute to The Man and His Music" plays at 8 p.m. Fridays, 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays at NBC Tower, 454 N. Columbus Drive; phone 312-222-1188.

# Tempo

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 13, 1999

**NO MERE NOVEL**  
Interplay of American and Russian  
cultures takes a dangerous ride  
aboard the Mir space station.

See Page 3

FNW

## Banking on Frank

Chicago singer  
staked his savings  
on doing Sinatra  
'His Way'

By Howard Reich  
TRIBUNE ARTS CRITIC

**L**ast July, a gifted but virtually unknown Chicago singer took a remarkable gamble.

Though he had just gotten back on his feet after fighting cancer and though he had debts to pay and a family to support, Ron Hawking decided — perhaps a bit recklessly — to raid his life's savings.

For years he had dreamed of staging a one-man tribute to the high priest of all crooners, Frank Sinatra. And now that Hawking had regained his health, he decided the time was right to take the plunge into his Individual Retirement Account.

With a little luck, he figured, he might be able to keep the show afloat for six weeks, recoup his investment and maybe even pick up a little "mad money," as Ol' Blue Eyes used to call it.

Six months and nearly 200 shows later, "His Way: A Tribute to the Man and His Music" stands not only as one of the most enduring theatrical hits of the season but a turning point in the life of a formidable Chicago singer.

