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Making a connection. From an intimate nightclub to a big concert hall, a cabaret singer can light up the night.

BY LEAH A. ZELDES Daily Herald Correspondent

Grappling with the definition of "cabaret," Chicago diva Nan Mason called up Google and read the first definitions it offered.

"A simple performance platform, with the audience usually seated at tables. ..."

"A restaurant or nightclub providing short programs of live entertainment. ..."

"A spot that is open late at night and that provides entertainment (as singers or dancers) as well as dancing and food and drink. ..."

That might define the place but delineating the form comes harder. Certainly composers like Porter and Irving Berlin and others of the "Great American Songbook" figure hugely. Yet music of the likes of Elton John, the Beatles, Elvis and Laura Nyro turns up on local set lists as well, not to mention newly composed songs.

In Chicago performers also lean toward local traditions.

"Our heart comes from jazz and the blues and New York's comes from Broadway," said Bradford Thacker, a Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs program director, who arranges cabaret shows for the city.

About the only benchmark everyone agrees on is that cabaret focuses on vocals

Nan Mason

When we asked local fans and artists to name Chicago's top cabaret singers, Nan Mason's name was on every list.

Mason does a four-hour show at ***Chestnut Grill*** in Streeterville each night from Tuesday through Saturday, perhaps the only local artist to perform so regularly at one venue.

"Nan Mason truly is the best entertainer in Chicago," Thacker said.

"She's the best in Chicago," echoed TV producer Roger Anderson, a regular at her show, along with other cast and crew members of "ER."

"She keeps a room lively all night long," Thacker said.

From her perch on the piano, the petite Mason practically electrifies the room. Wisecracking and bantering with her audience between bursts of song, she keeps them focused right where she wants them.

"She's also the quickest, wittiest person I know," Thacker said. "I love what she does."

As a singer, she ranges from smooth and sweet to torridly torchy, with a rich, slightly breathy tone and a repertoire that mixes blues, jazz and pop with Tin Pan Alley, Broadway and Hollywood. She calls "This is My Life," the Shirley Bassey signature, her theme song.

Mason and other top cabaret performers, said singer MaryMonica Thomas, have a knack for making a song their own.

"Nan sang a Barbra Streisand song, 'What Are You Doing for the Rest of Your Life?' Barbra Streisand didn't touch me. When Nan sang it, I got it," she said.

A Washington, D.C., native, Mason came to Chicago to study theater at DePaul University and sing rock 'n' roll. In the late 1970s, she turned torch singer, and presided over The Pump Room for most of a decade before moving on to New York and Hollywood. When Mason returned to Chicago in 1990, there wasn't much of a cabaret scene, so she mostly sang jazz until the tide turned back toward cabaret - or whatever Chicago calls cabaret - in the late '90s.

She recently released a new CD, "One for My Baby," a collection of Harold Arlen hits such as "Stormy Weather" and "Over the Rainbow."

Nan Mason sings up a storm, chivvies and cracks up her audience and generally hosts a marvelous party from 8 p.m. to midnight Tuesdays through Saturdays at **Chestnut Grill & Wine Bar**, 200 E. Chestnut St., Chicago. No cover charge. (312) 266-4500