

# Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100

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JERRY ZOLYNSKY/Staff photographer

Phil Marcus Esser of Farmington Hills (right) is joined by Charlie Latimer of Detroit and Barbara Bredius of Troy. Esser started

out in music dreaming of national success. To his surprise he found happiness in the Detroit area.

## Trio struts its witty stuff



**Cathie Breidenbach**

"Somerset Strut" continues with performances at 8:30 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturdays in Somerset Mall Troy. Dinner reservations are available 6-7 p.m. and 8-9 p.m. Reservations for the show alone are for 8 p.m. and 10 p.m.

By Cathie Breidenbach  
special writer

Phil Marcus Esser's new show "Somerset Strut" combines highlights from the best musical reviews he's produced through the years. Esser calls the loosely structured show a "suite of suites" featuring songs by Cole Porter, a suite by Jacques Brel, another by Bob Dylan and Paul Simon and two songs by Esser himself.

The selections not only showcase the ample talents of the show's three stars, Esser, Barbara Bredius and Charlie Latimer, but celebrate with infectious humor the rapport the three musicians share. They write

the romance, the highjinks and the wit out of wonderful songs which are familiar but not hackneyed from over exposure.

The show rolls along creating mini dramas rife with romance from Cole Porter songs like "Got You Under My Skin" and "In the Still of the Night."

In "The Middle Class," Esser and Latimer tease their way through Brel's witty song with deadpan faces and articulate hips that gain comic momentum as the song unrolls. Bredius out-Merman's the mighty Ethel herself when she belts a song she has the advantage of a voice that's easier on the ears than Merman's but not one decibel less dynamic. In staging his own song, "Bartender," Esser reveals his secret penchant to be a magician with some engaging slight of hand.

DESPITE ADJUSTING to a stage and theater new to the company, the opening night show ran with mini-

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## He knows life's more than a cabaret

By Cathie Breidenbach  
special writer

In 1964, Phil Marcus Esser stepped off a bus to grab a quick dinner in Detroit and make just one phone call.

"I literally had my guitar in hand," he says, when he made a call to the old Retort coffee house that led to a two-week engagement beginning that night as opening act for Jose Feliciano.

"After 28 years, I'm still here," says Esser, who lives in Farmington Hills with his wife, Susan, and their four children ranging in age from 16 to 22.

All those years ago when he stopped in Detroit, the lanky young man from Omaha was on the road after serving four years in the Air Force. In those days Esser wanted a mainstream, name-in-bright-lights career in music. Now superstardom holds little allure to the man who says he would rather, "consider how I want to spend the valuable time I have on the planet."

"It's a lot easier to have perspective when you're 46. I want to keep developing and learning more. We may not be aware when we're younger what's going on inside us."

The man with the memorable bar-

itone likes to keep his finger on his own pulse as well as on the pulse of the town that has become home. Those in local entertainment will tell you Phil Marcus Esser has an active social conscience and a soft heart for worthy causes.

On May 1 he sang at the third annual benefit concert billed Love Song III, an assembly of local entertainers who performed to raise money to fight Alzheimer's disease. Esser's wife, Susan, produced Love Song III which was another in a long list of benefits he's done to help people in Detroit.

The Camelot/folk idealism of the Sixties left its mark on the man and on his music. "The Sixties were an exceptional time to get involved in music," he says. "The whole folk thing was an extra side of my education. The content of song lyrics fed me. The Sixties were a nice little renaissance that hasn't happened since."

As an entertainer and as a musician, Esser has grown beyond his early days playing clubs on the folk circuit in Chicago, Kansas City, Greenwich Village and at college towns among Midwestern corn fields. Times changed and music changed with them.

"Activism began to lose its appeal

at the end of the '60s," he remembers. "There were fewer clubs and fewer college concerts available." That's when he began expanding his musical repertoire. "My music is broader based now," Esser says. "I'm no longer restricted to things I can accompany on guitar. I'm able to be part of a larger musical world."

He sings a wide variety of songs that make his music difficult to categorize, a musical collage of songs from folk to mainstream, including favorites from every decade. He prefers songs that lend themselves to the intimacy of a cabaret format and almost always includes a few songs he wrote himself.

Esser remains fond of music that has something meaningful to say. "The kind of music that's in fashion doesn't make any difference any more. I'm not writing and selling songs to make money. I write songs about the community and what's happening day by day."

When the folk scene diminished in the late Sixties and early Seventies, Esser got into producing and directing shows. "It's very rewarding, but you can work yourself into oblivion with 16-hour days."

His first blockbuster show "Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and

Living in New York," played at Mercy College Dinner Theatre for the phenomenally long run of a year and five months. "Brel" was the first time Barbara Bredius added her charismatic way with a song to an Esser show and the two have worked together professionally ever since. After "Brel" came "Personals," which ran a month longer than "Brel" did.

"Working on 'Personals' was a very exciting time," Esser says of creating the show with the talented songwriter Mike Smith.

For the nation's bicentennial, Esser wrote "150 Spirited Years," a musical history of the state that played at the State Fair. Over the years he's tallied 25 musical reviews including "Cole Porter at the Book," "Dylan in the Park," and "1946 Detroit." In recent years Esser and his company created shows at Tremont's Restaurant on the edge of Detroit's Greektown.

This weekend, Esser opens with long-time singing partners Barbara Bredius and Charlie Latimer at the Somerset Dinner Theatre in the Somerset Mall, Troy. The show billed "Somerset Strut" will be "fairly non-nonsense, a carefully crafted evening," he promises. But its focus will be wider than the cocaine theme

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—Phil Marcus Esser

shows he usually produces. "Somerset Strut" will be a work in progress that's continually changing. I want to keep developing," he says, "but it was killing me to have to write a whole new show three or four times a year with a new theme and a new cast."

The music in "Somerset Strut" will span the decades with a suite of Cole Porter's "lush, sensuous melodies," a suite of Jacques Brel songs with their tough/tender sophistication, songs by Bob Dylan and Paul Simon, as well as a sprinkling of some of Phil's own songs and a few all-time favorites.

This past year Esser played a Sunday afternoon concert at the Somerset Mall. It brought to mind when the mall first opened 15 years ago and asked him to play at its theatre. At the time, he thought the theatre was a bit small. "Since then I've

been at places a lot smaller."

The mall's lower-level theatre seats 150 and with two seatings scheduled on Friday and Saturday evenings, the cabaret theatre can accommodate 300 people a night. He's pleased to be playing the Somerset Mall Dinner Theatre for several reasons — fine food being chief among his enthusiasms. "For the first time I can honestly say we've got food," Esser says of the elegant fare created by Sebastian's hard-working chef, Matt Prentice. The cabaret seating in the mall's theater room suits the intimate musical theater that's become Esser's forte. He hopes the convenience of the suburban mall will draw well, but when it comes down to it, Esser anticipates that his audience will "essentially be the same good folks" he's been entertaining since he got off a bus in 1964 and Detroit became home.

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