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Spencer Day woos with his heartfelt way

David Wiegand, Chronicle Staff Writer

In the past 10 years or so, two young singers have emerged in the Bay Area whose careers have been so exciting and, frankly, adventurous, that I'd show up to hear them if they sang a fast-food jingle. One is Paula West, of course. The other, who opened a far too brief gig at the Rrazz Room Tuesday night, is Spencer Day.

As he proved repeatedly during an engaging 75-minute set, Day is a singer who not only wants to take chances, he needs to.

It would be far too easy for Day to apply that brandy-flavored baritone to the usual cabaret standards, but Day has never opted for the easy way to fame, which is probably the reason he's not as famous as his talent deserves. Instead of Gershwin, Berlin and maybe, if we dare, a Sondheim or two, Day offers a set dominated by his own music, which runs the gamut from country waltz to sweet jazz to soft rock.

His melodies are infectious, his lyrics skew a bit too often to the moon-June side, though no one could resist their sincerity - his arrangements are dazzling and, most of all, his delivery is heartfelt and, often, heartbreaking. He is not only a superb pianist, but a brilliant arranger, who consistently celebrates the partnership between his voice and the piano.

With sublime support from bassist Geoff Brennan and guitarist/cellist/backup vocalist Yair Evnine, Day opened his set with "Till You Come to Me," a jazzy number grounded in a sweet and honest wistfulness.

Through a medley of his own music, Day told the audience about growing up in Utah, where the only video store featured either Disney films or MGM musicals. His song "The Vagabond" talked about a restless heart. "Skeleton in the Closet" spoke of family secrets - "We never talk about it/ But everybody knows." "Joe" told the story of a young man leaving a small town to take his chances in California and fearing his ambition would lead to an inevitable fall.

Here and there, Day offered music by other composers. The old standard "All I Do Is Dream of You" didn't quite translate from those leggy chorines of "Singin' in the Rain," but no matter: In a second, Day was back on track with an achingly lovely jazz arrangement of "Something Good" from "The Sound of Music." Later on, the Turtles' "Happy Together" and Depeche Mode's "Enjoy the Silence" made you realize Day could probably put his own spin on anyone's music.

He also offered a couple of "new standards," songs he's recording for an album due out this fall, including "The Weeping Willow," which he is doing to a full string accompaniment for the new disc.

Day closed the show with one of his most popular songs, "Movie of Your Life," and tossed in a sweet pair of encores, Elvis Presley's "Treat Me Like a Fool," and Day's own lament of longing, "Arizona."

Lanky and unaffected, with a face that suggests a young James Stewart, Day treats his audience like old friends. And even if they're only hearing him for the first time, within a few notes, they've become friends for life.