

Friday evening, 8 p.m. I'm with a group gathered in the combined living room and studio of Rory Merritt Stitt. The walls are covered with his original artwork. There's a couple of mikes on chromed stands, speakers, guitars.

Stitt, who plays Portland Pride's Unity Stage on June 15, sits at the piano playing his version of Joni Mitchell's "Blue." The guests include friends Matthew Abelman and Heather Arndt, a bottle of merlot and roommate Kellee Grubb.

A year and a half ago, Grubb phoned Stitt at San Francisco's University of the Pacific, where he was studying at the music conservatory. "I'm moving to Portland," she said. "Want to come along?"

The two had grown up playing music together in Juneau, Alaska. "While other kids were going to the mall, we were at home making videos, composing songs," Grubb smiles. "It was an amazing, creative time for us. Rory has such passion."

Moments later Stitt plays "Look Up" from his recent CD, *The Narcissist*. The song is personal and reflective, but he makes eye contact, smiles and includes each of us in the performance. Arndt describes his singing as sensual and erotic. "It doesn't matter that he's gay. When he sings it...arouses me."

Grubb describes Stitt's coming out. "Our friend was sharing these fantasies about love that she'd had, and then Rory said that he had fantasies about men. We just said, 'Oh,'" she recalls. "Juneau's a pretty conservative place. My parents were from Kansas, so these kinds of things were very new to me."

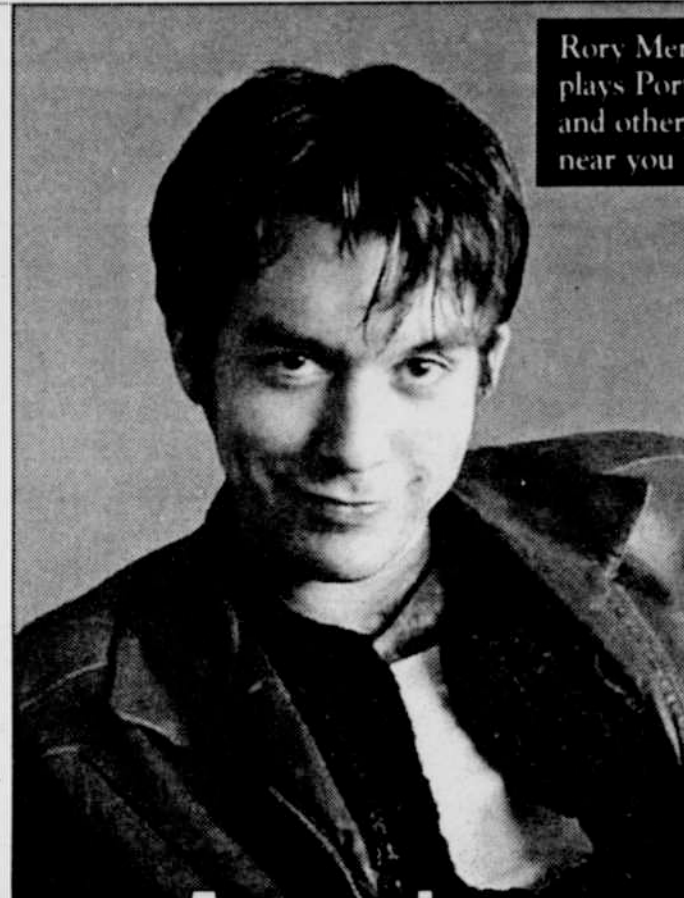
Stitt, 25, admits he first thought he was bi. "It was a journey, I guess, towards where I am now," which, he says to resounding laughter, is "97.5 percent gay."

The pianist and songwriter's lyrics, while open about his own sexuality, also reach out to anyone who seeks and experiences love. "Look Up" inquires, "Would you need another for the approval of your mother/someone to hide your face to dispel disgrace?" In "Even in You" he sings, "It's always been in you/every time I meet you/Mr. or Mrs. new/I see it within you/crying to get out of you."

"You would not imagine how many giddy lesbians come up to Rory when he sings Stevie Nicks' 'Dreams,'" Arndt reveals. "His singing just seems to transcend—I don't know—easy labels."

Stitt spent his first 16 years studying classical piano. Along the way, he listened to a wide array of musicians from Joni Mitchell and Tori Amos to Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin. He says he loves Joplin's "live fast, die young" approach to life.

He also cites influences such as chaos theory, classical jazz and Rachmaninoff. The classi-



Rory Merritt Stitt plays Portland Pride and other venues near you

Arousing

Mix David Bowie with Rachmaninoff and you get Rory Merritt Stitt

BY RACHEL LANE

cal training is apparent: Songs are layered with poetic lyrics, complex keyboard work and a lot of minor tones and riffs.

Although he was producing excellent work at the conservatory, Stitt admits he was still miserable. Grubb says that from her perspective, he felt trapped—that a classical discipline was "ironing the music out of him."

His blend of composition, poetry and musicianship results in songs and performance that are "outside the box," Arndt claims. "I like it sloppy and nasty like a good kiss."

We chat about the music business, what generates success or satisfaction—whether these are mutually exclusive. "There is a struggle to stay true to yourself," Stitt acknowledges, "or just do what you know may make you financially successful."

The musician appears to be at the beginning of critical success. He was selected by Unsigned America as one of only 10 new artists to be represented at last year's MIDEM international music convention in France for

promotion in Europe and Asia.

Stitt's vocal range extends from baritone up to a clear voice that approaches mezzo-soprano. Vocal transitions could benefit from further honing and perhaps more training, but there's no question about the potential of that voice or the emotional generosity of the singer.

"With a voice like yours, baby, you'll go places," Arndt insists. We all chuckle a little, but I think each of us agrees.

The evening closes with a number Stitt describes as the "feel-good song of the century." Immediately, I think of tunes like "The 59th Street Bridge Song" by Simon & Garfunkel—you know, "Slow down, you move too fast. Got to make the mornin' last." Or the Carpenters' "Top of the World."

I keep quiet, reflecting on how I've just aged myself. Stitt sings:

*I have faith in you
I have faith in you
Why don't you?
If you never seen it in you
Just start now
Cut the red tape
It's your mind, your realm
Do with it what you will
Take your free passage
It's even in you. ♪*

RORY MERRITT STITT performs at 6:25 p.m. June 15 on the Unity Stage at Portland Pride. *The Narcissist* is available at Music Millennium and Everyday Music. Find Stitt at www.rorymerrittstitt.com.

RACHEL LANE is an actress, director and writer who can be seen daily at Portland parks accompanied by Mac, her handsome German shorthaired pointer.

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