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LOCAL TALENT

Pianist Doug Montgomery keeps it fresh for Santa Fe music lovers

Brian Sandford

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Doug Montgomery plays piano at Rio Chama Prime Steakhouse. He has been performing weekly in Santa Fe since the 1980s.

Luis Sánchez Saturno/The New Mexican

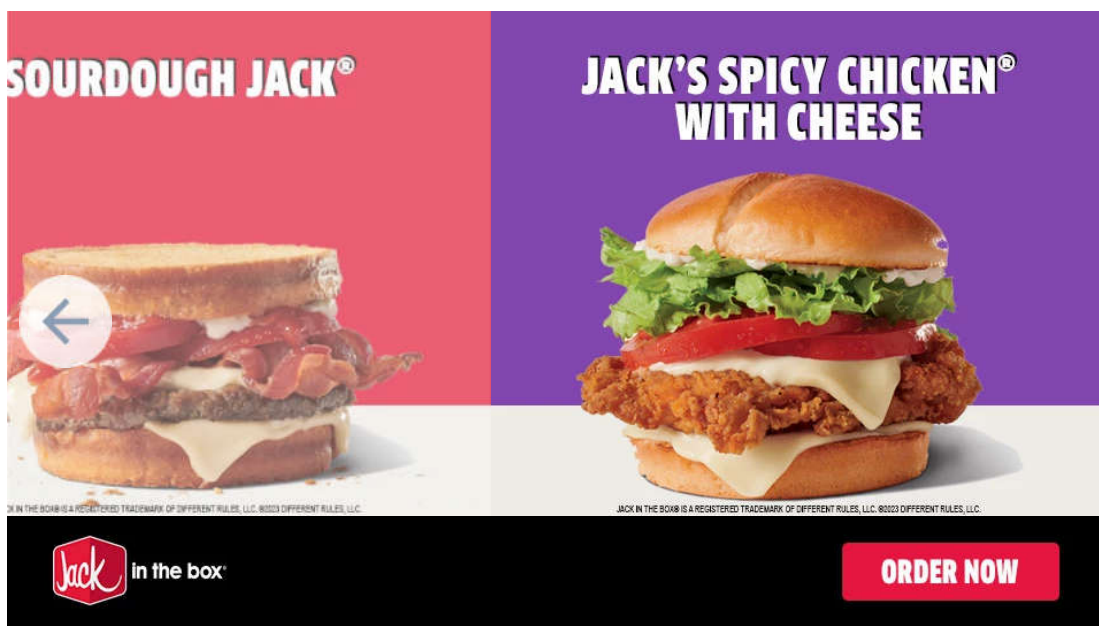
Seated at the Bechstein studio grand piano at Rio Chama Prime Steakhouse on a recent Monday, Doug Montgomery plays George Gershwin's classic "Rhapsody in Blue" like a series of unrelated songs. By slowing the tempo and volume, he tricks audience members several times into thinking the

tune is over, eliciting applause before he launches into another segment of the orchestral jazz classic. After 12 minutes of teasing, Montgomery races his fingers down the keyboard in a dramatic flourish, leaving them suspended in the air as if to signal, “*Now I’m done.*” All 30 or so audience members rise to their feet, clapping wildly and cheering.

Montgomery bonds verbally and via facial expressions with audience members, who write song requests on sheets of paper and leave bills in a tip jar shaped like an upside-down hat. Montgomery, 69, has had decades to fine-tune this relationship with Santa Feans; he has played Sunday and Monday nights at Rio Chama for about 18 months and was a fixture at Vanessie Santa Fe from 1982 to 2022.

Montgomery insists he doesn’t tire of playing many of the same songs decade after decade, and it helps that the Juilliard-trained musician improvises on even the most familiar tunes. A John Lennon-Beatles medley begins with “Imagine” in an unfamiliar key, followed by “Hey Jude” featuring a bouncy piano sound resembling the underpinning of “Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da,” then “Eleanor Rigby,” “Something,” and “When I’m 64.” For fun — and perhaps in acknowledgement that much of his early-arriving audience is older than 64 — Montgomery progressively raises the age in the latter’s otherwise-familiar refrain, singing, “When I’m 74,” then 84, then 94, and finally 104.

ADVERTISING



“The best trick is to pretend I’m writing a piece for the first time, even if I’ve played “Phantom of the Opera” 15,000 times, or “Rhapsody in Blue” 50,000 times,” he says, referring to musicians like himself as “actors who happen to play the piano as our medium.”

Montgomery says he resigned from his longtime gig at Vanessie, and while he prefers to not go into detail, it wasn't a happy ending. After performing regularly in the same spot for 40 years, he says, he had nightmares and asked himself, "What happened? What did I just do?"

details

Go see Doug

6-9 p.m. Sundays and Mondays

Rio Chama Prime Steakhouse, 414 Old Santa Fe Trail

riochamasantafe.com



Doug Montgomery plays piano at Rio Chama Prime Steakhouse on January 13.

Luis Sánchez Saturno/The New Mexican

The bad dreams didn't last long; he had been idled for about a month when management at Rio Chama contacted him about performing at the restaurant-bar. Playing piano twice a week is a full-time job, Montgomery says; he rehearses Wednesdays through Fridays and is at the steakhouse before and after shows, interacting with the crowd.

Montgomery's passion for music was first ignited in 1964, when he listened to a piano teacher play songs popularized by Harry Belafonte. Entranced, he told the teacher,

Miss Rennen, that he wanted to play piano as well as she did.

"She said, 'Well, darling, everyone does, but no one wants to practice,'" Montgomery says. "I said, 'Miss Rennen, I will practice.'"

While that proved correct, Montgomery faced another obstacle. In the 1960s, he says, many middle-class families had a piano in the home. His did not.

“So I came after school every day,” he says. “She started teaching me, and after the third week she said, ‘You’re really learning fast, but I can’t keep this up and grade my papers.’ So she made a call, and somebody took me on for a scholarship. But I still used school to practice until I got an upright piano.”

Montgomery, a Chicago native, became part of Northwestern University’s pre-college music prep program at age 13. He is grateful for Miss Rennen’s outsize influence on his life and career and has relished the chance to similarly influence others.

“People will come up and say, ‘Fifteen years ago my daughter sang with you when she was in high school, and now she’s a professional singer,’” he says. “‘She remembers that moment when you encouraged her.’”

“Let’s face it: 100 years ago, probably everybody had a piano in their living room. There were over 400 piano manufacturers, and now there are three in this country. That gives you an idea of how it’s taking a bit of a backseat.” — *Doug Montgomery*

Montgomery has watched Santa Fe audiences change over the past four decades. Advances in technology have given many people a reason to stay home, he says.

“We had out-of-control crowds in the ’80s and ’90s,” he says. “Also, there were only about five music venues in 1982 or ’83. There are 50 now that this town has expanded.”

“Rhapsody in Blue” and Beatles music were cultural touchstones, both then and now. Montgomery refers to the Fab Four as melodic geniuses.

“I don’t have to play a song in the style that they wrote it in, necessarily. If I’m doing a Beatles medley, I might do the song ‘Michelle’ in the style of [Russian composer Sergei] Rachmaninoff or something like that. That’s what I love about melody-centric songs: I can do the gamut because this is the whole orchestra here,” he says, nodding at the piano.

Most of the songs Montgomery performs are at least 30 years old. “Rhapsody in Blue” premiered February 12, 1924, at Manhattan’s Aeolian Hall. As a performance piece, it turns 100 years old this month. Because of its dramatic resonance, he sometimes uses it as the centerpiece of a performance.

Music has become more rhythmic and hook-oriented in the past few decades — and less piano-friendly, Montgomery says.



Francis Freeman of Santa Fe, right, applauds with her friends after Doug Montgomery sang "Happy Birthday" for her upcoming 90th birthday at Rio Chama Prime Steakhouse on January 13, 2024.

Luis Sánchez Saturno/The New Mexican

“The hooks of the music in the ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s were piano-centric,” he says. “Let’s face it: 100 years ago, probably everybody had a piano in their living room. There were over 400 piano manufacturers, and now there are three in this country. That gives you an idea of how it’s taking a bit of a backseat.”

Montgomery earned a bachelor’s degree in 1976 from Northwestern, followed by a master’s in 1978 from Juilliard School of Music, where he later taught. That training shows up in his playing, regardless of the type of music, he says.

“There’s some classical music in my playing and in my arrangements for pop tunes, Broadway songs, and movie themes,” he says. “A lot of them are grounded in classical techniques — things I’ve learned like arpeggios.”

Montgomery’s distinctive playing can be heard on the 11 CDs that sell for \$20 each at his website, dougmontgomery.com. Many of the titles are self-explanatory: *A Christmastime Piano*, *A Movie Romance*, and *An Evening With Doug Montgomery — Doug Sings!*

Montgomery sees himself performing until either his health stops cooperating or people stop showing up. He aims to delay the former by working out daily and practicing yoga.

Like most performers, Montgomery was forced to stop playing in public during the height of the pandemic. Because of the human connections that are vital to his profession, he doesn’t worry about artificial intelligence pushing him into retirement.

“It goes back to caveman times, where people had this desire to be around the campfire with others,” he says. “This is that campfire.”

Brian Sanford

Pasatiempo reporter