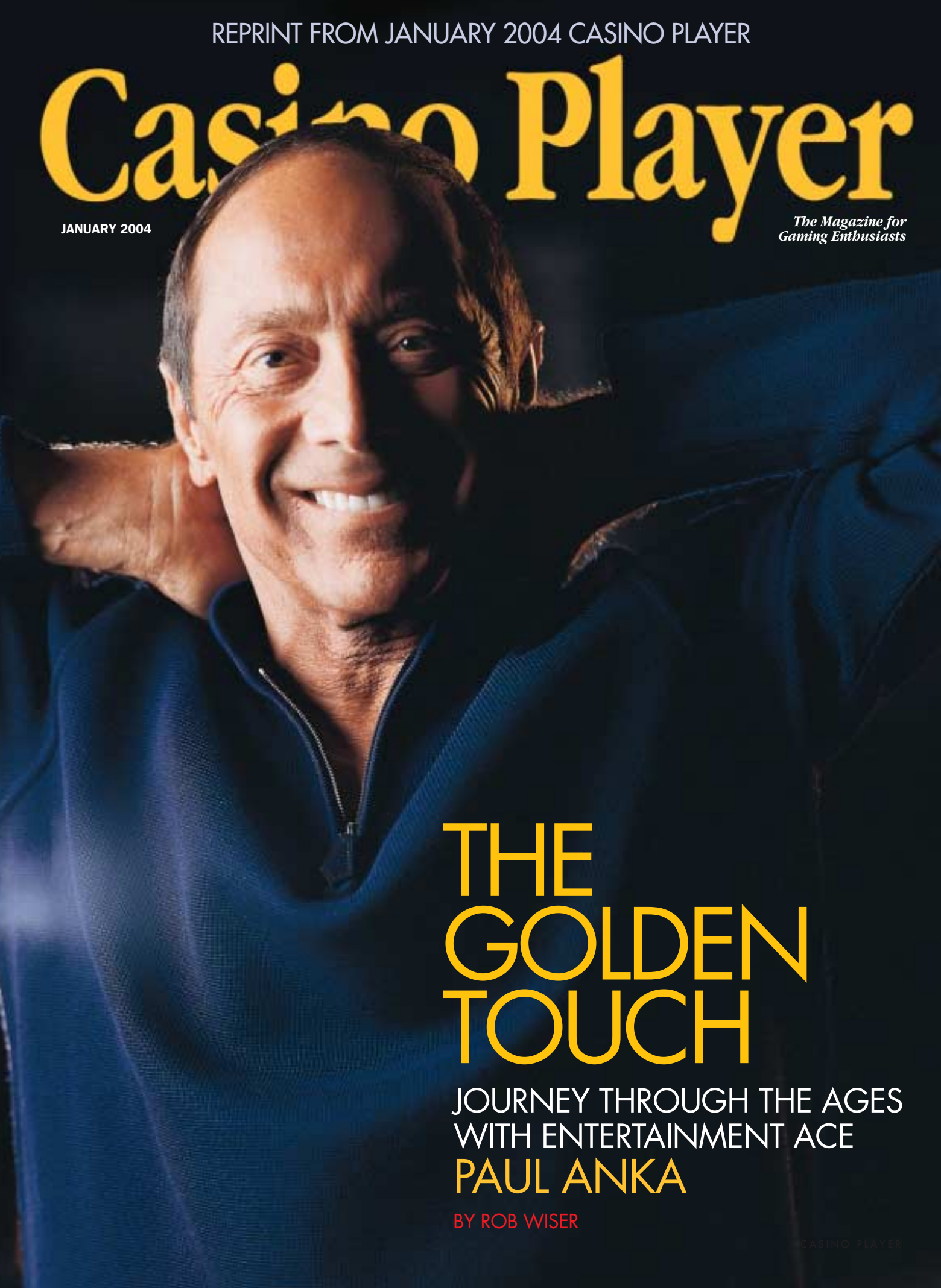


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# Casino Player

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*The Magazine for  
Gaming Enthusiasts*



## THE GOLDEN TOUCH

JOURNEY THROUGH THE AGES  
WITH ENTERTAINMENT ACE  
PAUL ANKA

BY ROB WISER

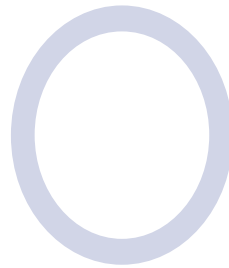
A man in a dark suit is performing on stage, holding a microphone and gesturing with his other hand. A large spotlight illuminates him from above, creating a dramatic effect against a dark background.

# ANKA'S WAY

A JOURNEY THROUGH  
THE AGES WITH THE  
GAMING INDUSTRY'S  
ENTERTAINMENT ACE

BY ROB WISER





VER THE COURSE OF A CAREER THAT HAS SPANNED MORE THAN 45 YEARS, PAUL ANKA HAS ACHIEVED LEGENDARY STATUS ON TWO FRONTS, BOTH AS A PERFORMER AND SONGWRITER. IN ADDITION TO PENNING COUNTLESS HITS FOR HIS OWN RECORDS, HE HAS WRITTEN CLASSICS FOR NAMES SUCH AS SINATRA, STREISAND, BUDDY HOLLY AND TOM JONES.

THE STAGGERING NUMBERS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES: HE'S HAD A RECORD ON BILLBOARD'S TOP 50 CHART FOR FIVE CONSECUTIVE DECADES, SOLD MORE THAN 60 MILLION LPS AND SINGLES, WRITTEN MORE THAN 900 SONGS AND RECORDED MORE THAN 124 ALBUMS IN FIVE DIFFERENT LANGUAGES.

Born in 1941 in Ottawa, Ontario, Anka's destiny was clear at an early age. By 11, the precocious crooner was performing in clubs. At 15, eager to get his music published, he went to Los Angeles to try to catch the industry's attention. One of his songs, "I Confess," was recorded but failed to generate interest; he had to work for a month as a movie theater usher in order to earn enough money to return to Ottawa. He was back in high school, continuing to write songs but considering a career in journalism, when a local disc jockey heard his work. He called Anka's father and fatefully told him, "Andrew, your boy's too big for Canada."

Anka borrowed \$100 from his father and headed for New York City, where he pitched his latest material to anyone who would listen. One of the songs, "Diana," was inspired by his crush on an older babysitter. Though Anka didn't get the girl, the song landed him a record deal with ABC-Paramount and became a No. 1 hit. Ed Sullivan asked him to sing it on his show, which catapulted Anka to international stardom as a teen idol. That song alone would go on to sell over 20 million copies worldwide.

Anka hit the fast lane and never looked back, writing and recording at a prolific pace. His output was so great that he would eventually need several companies to publish and protect his music. He hit another jackpot in 1958 with "You Are My Destiny," and soon other giants of the day were turning to Anka for material. The following year, Buddy Holly scored big with the Anka composition "It Doesn't Matter Any More."

By 19, the babyfaced phenomenon was a millionaire, generating hysteria on "American Bandstand" and performing to sold-out crowds around the world. Newspapers breathlessly reported on the 20,000 Swedish fans who sat for two hours in the rain to hear him sing; the thousands in Japan who braved a typhoon; the frenzied crowds in Puerto Rico that necessitated a helicopter

## TODAY, STILL RAZOR-SHARP AT AGE 62, HE'S EARNED MORE THAN ENOUGH WEALTH AND RESPECT TO REST ON HIS LAURELS. BUT THAT'S NEVER BEEN ANKA'S STYLE

rescue. "He is a polished performer, confident but not brash," the *New York Times* wrote in 1961. "There is a charm and voice that easily handles sentimental and swing songs. Mr. Anka could give lessons on showmanship." He was not yet out of his teens.

Anka kept churning out hits, including "Lonely Boy" (from the film "Girl's Town"), the slow-dance classic "Put Your Head on My Shoulder," "It's Time to Cry," and "Puppy Love," inspired by his romance with fellow teen star Annette Funicello. He also branched out into acting, appearing in the war epic "The Longest Day" in 1962 and penning the title song, which earned him an Academy Award nomination.

But success as a teen idol is fleeting, as Anka learned the hard way when the Beatles arrived in America and the British Invasion redefined popular music. Anka and his peers were wiped off the radio virtually overnight. But instead of burning out or fading away, Anka shrewdly revamped his sound and took his act to the nightclubs of New York, Miami Beach and Las Vegas. He began writing more mature music, determined to follow in the footsteps of his heroes Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jr.

Those men would become his friends and mentors, and they, in turn, would turn to "the kid"—as Sinatra called him—for his magic touch. In 1968, as Ol' Blue Eyes contemplated retirement, Anka delivered "My Way" for what was to be his final album. The instant classic revitalized Sinatra's career and has since been recorded by more than 50 artists. Yet another feather in Anka's cap was the "Tonight Show" theme, which he wrote for Johnny Carson in 1962 when he took over as host. The most recognized theme song in television history, it played in American households five nights a week for 30 years.

In addition to being a consummate musician and showman, Anka has proven himself to be a savvy businessman. When he signed with RCA in 1962, he had the foresight to purchase the rights to his master recordings. He now presides over his own publishing empire; eBay and Mercedes Benz are among the companies that have licensed his songs for advertisements.

Today, still razor-sharp at age 62, he's earned more than enough wealth and respect to rest on his laurels.

But that's never been Anka's style. He continues to tour up to 10 months out of the year, shuttling between gigs on his private jet, and has established himself as one of the gaming industry's biggest draws. He performs regularly at top casinos from Connecticut's Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods to Las Vegas' MGM Grand, still taking the stage each night like a kid eager to share his music with the world. And no matter how familiar you may be with the man and his songs, chances are that at least one point during the show you'll utter the words, "He wrote *that* one, too?"

Anka spent some rare downtime during his current tour to speak with *Casino Player* about his extraordinary journey from teen heartthrob to entertainment icon.

**CP: During your days as a teen idol, you wrote your own material. How unusual was this back then?**

**PA:** Very unusual. I was working at the local newspaper, trying to get into journalism, and I wasn't really going for music until I was thrown a short hand and took music. I wrote poems, started [writing] music, and when I played it around, people would laugh at me because primarily back then it was established songwriters writing for certain groups. I persevered and had to get a great deal of confidence going, and learned to sing them myself. I ultimately went down to New York to audition, in an industry that was in its infancy stage back then. Pop music didn't really emerge until the Beatles hit. So I walked into Don Costa's office (at ABC), after being turned down everywhere, only because they were a new company starting up. He was the genius behind that whole chapter in my life, who saw something and worked with me. Then I started that whole young-kid-singer-songwriter trend.

**When the Beatles hit America and turned the music scene upside-down, was there a moment where you thought you might be finished?**

Absolutely. It wasn't unlike what Britney (Spears) is going through today, or any young artist. You have that first-stage situation, and then you realize you have to change. You have to grow. You realize someone else is coming along. Today is a much different environment than back then—there was a bunch of us, we weren't



"SAMMY WAS A VERY CLOSE FRIEND. HE TAUGHT ME A GREAT DEAL IN TERMS OF STYLE, ENERGY AND SO FORTH. FRANK WAS THE SAME WAY. YOU CAN'T HELP BUT LEARN FROM PEOPLE LIKE THAT."

"The Kid" monkeying around with Sinatra, presenting him with a "birthday gift"

accepted by media, we just had our fans. You wondered where you were going to go. [I looked] at making that evolution because the Beatles came and took us off the radio. I realized I had to get into clubs.

**At that point, was it your ability to write songs that allowed you to keep going?**

The only thing that saved me, and gave me a lot more hope, was the fact that through the lean period I sold a lot of records, wrote [the theme for] "The Longest Day," which was nominated for an Academy Award, and the "Tonight Show" theme, which was important. [I wrote for] Buddy Holly. All that stuff kept me kind of viable—working Vegas, working internationally. I had a career where others didn't, but we were blown off the radio.

**You've written hits in a number of different genres, from pop to rock 'n' roll to country. Is it about trying to capitalize on what's hot at the moment, or do all of these styles of music inspire you?**

It's all hopefully [done] with integrity. You say [to yourself], "What can I do with my instrument?" Country music is a very pure, simple American genre. It's great music. Anyone that's got a voice can sing it, as long as they put it in their own style. But you sing songs that

you can handle, mechanically as a performer, and vocally. When I sat with [Bobby] Darrin in the beginning, he went totally left—into doing Dylan, and the guitar and the image change, which I didn't think would be what I was all about, or that I could pull it off honestly. You stay within the realm of what you think you can do.

**Have you ever started writing a song for another artist, realized you had a hit on your hands, and wondered whether you should record it yourself?**

"My Way" they questioned, even though I wrote it for Frank. The record company wanted me to keep it. "She's a Lady" I could have done, but Tom [Jones] was looking for something so I rewrote it [to] fit what he was about. There are times that happens, absolutely.

**Your show includes reverent tributes to Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr. What did these men mean to you?**

I came to Vegas in the late '50s with Sophie Tucker as an opening act. I went right to the Sands. I was surrounded by the Rat Pack. They took me in; they liked what I was about. They were obviously much older, and you learn a lot from people that you idolize, that you see are making an impact. Sammy was a very close friend. He taught me a great deal in terms of style, energy and so forth. Frank



was the same way. You can't help but learn from people like that. Not unlike an athlete—you're around people [from whom] you learn technique. You keep it your own, but there are all kinds of little lessons that you learn. That goes along with not drinking too much, not smoking too much, not gambling too much. Which ultimately killed Sammy.

**We've all heard how ruthless the music industry can be. How have you managed to keep such tight control over your career and your finances?**

I started at a young age where everyone was looking to take advantage of you, where everyone was not giving you an opportunity. Those of us that hit in the late 50s were, in a sense, pioneers. I realized early in my career, watching people come and go, that it was a very dangerous business to be in because the turnover was fast. I saw how I got ripped off in my young years—which is okay, you learn your lesson—but I felt that if you didn't take charge of your life and weren't hands-on, you were going to lose it, not unlike any business. You couldn't be in any sense vulnerable to someone else's whims or [to] someone that didn't have your best interests at heart.

**You actually own the rights to much of your music, which has become a lucrative business in itself. How did this come about?**

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I started by buying back my masters, because I realized that the company I was with was too small and RCA, where I ultimately wound up, was a bigger and better company. So I went to them, and the first thing I did was buy my masters for \$250,000. Which was a lot of money back then, but I felt I wanted to keep my life and career intact. It has now grown into a huge asset for me. Today our licensing business is very vast and there is a lot of value in it.

**How do you balance the demands of touring, recording and running your various businesses?**

I didn't always want to be the smartest guy in the room. I think you have to surround yourself with people that you can bounce off of. Ultimately being around long enough, and knowing the guys—whether it's Steve Wynn or the guys at Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods—you get to know them, you can cut your own deals and know how to cut what's best for you. You get into that pattern and you stay with it. You have your eye on the ball and you can deal with all the facts right in front of you, instead of secondhand.

**When you penned "My Way," did you have a sense it was going to be one for the ages?**

Without a doubt. I'd just seen Sinatra in Florida, and he'd

Elvis, Brazilian jazz great Sergio Mendes, and Paul Anka; Anka onstage with singer Engelbert Humperdinck

teased me for years about writing for him. I was afraid to, because he was into Gershwin and all those other guys. He never liked pop music till near the end, when he started recording it. What really hit me was he told me he was retiring. That was a big blow to me, to think that Frank Sinatra would retire. He said, "I might do one more album. When are you gonna write something for me, kid?" I went back to New York after meeting him in Miami, and it was like one in the morning, pouring rain, and I sat down at the typewriter and I just started whaling away. "And now, the end is near..." I wrote it as if Frank Sinatra were writing it for himself.

**Elvis also recorded a version, which he often performed in concert. Did The King have to come to you for permission?**

Well, I knew Elvis. I knew him extensively when he started coming to Vegas. He would come over to Ceasars Palace, see the show, come over and visit, sit backstage. Through that whole evolution, of when he hit town and things started going bad for him, and where he started losing control, I would sit with him and just try to tell him to get it together: "Let's go to dinner, just us, not thirty people. Get ahold of this." Which he couldn't. And he would tell me on many occasions, "'My Way' means so much to me and I'm going to record it." I'd say, "Elvis, it's not your type of song, really." He said, "No, you have no idea. It means so much to me." Ultimately he did it, and I granted the license. Absolutely.

**You're now riding high on another wave, as a headliner at major casinos. How do you view this phase of your career?**

Mohegan Sun, a four-year deal... Borgata, a long-term deal... and a relationship contract with The Mirage corporation. They mean a lot to me because they're unprecedented. I don't think there are many long-term deals of this nature. They're for millions of dollars; it's a great [show of] faith in that they know the kind of gaming people that I bring in, and for them to step up it's a huge pat on the back as far as I'm concerned. It's with people I like to work for, to the extent that I do market-

ing parties. I want to know the high rollers and their wives. I want to know what they're into. They're the ones that support me and come in and add to the bottom line when I play places. It's a very important industry, it's been supportive to me for many, many years... they're very, very lucrative and important deals and they're with friends.

**Unlike the famously hard-living Rat Pack, you look like you stay in shape. Has this been one of the keys to your longevity?**

You have to be fit to go onstage, because in a sense you're like an athlete. You take the average player in a football game and it's fourteen minutes [of action] out of three hours. I'm up there for an hour and forty with high intensity. That means I'm not a smoker, I'm not a drinker. I exercise, I eat well. I just take care of my body. You need that kind of energy to do what I do, otherwise it's very [obvious]—you'll see people that don't take of themselves, what happens to them in our industry and other industries. Anyone that doesn't get that, I scratch my head. I don't get it.

I'm running my business during the day and performing at night, and my body is totally in tune and ready to go, and I'm not aching or unable to do what I do.

**You've become a mentor in your own right to young singers such as Michael Bubl , who headlined the Borgata on its opening weekend.**

Very much so. I've mentored him and brought a lot of his arrangements to the album, which I coproduced with David Foster. I've worked with Michael for a good year on everything—business, staging, everything that he's about.

**Do you see it as a passing of the torch—making sure that this style of music is preserved for generations to come?**

From my point of view, I look at my life in five-year increments. If I'm feeling good I'll continue to do it. It's the kind of music you can sing till whatever age as long as you have your health. I think it's educating these peo-

"I'M RUNNING MY BUSINESS DURING THE DAY AND PERFORMING AT NIGHT, AND MY BODY IS TOTALLY IN TUNE AND READY TO GO..."



On his 1998 CD "A Body of Work," Anka's collaborators included Ricky Martin, Celine Dion and Tom Jones



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ple so they can join the club and keep going, because this kind of music is not going away. I've always helped with guiding people.

**Looking back, what were your three greatest career highs?**

The first time I came down to the United States with "Diana" and did the "Ed Sullivan Show." That was a real kick in the head. I knew my life was changing. The second was when I wrote "My Way," because I had come from all that adolescent stuff, pre-20s, [when] the Beatles had derailed us. And I guess my return to Canada last year, when I went home. I was given the ambassadorship, the Prime Minister was there, it was a big three-day

event. I experienced something going back there that I'd never experienced before.

**Is there a theme that runs through your body of work? A message in the music?**

Love is the strongest emotion that we all experience. I think predominantly it's about relationships and love. I've deviated from that on occasion, but by and large it's all about that, and that's always a very contemporary theme and something that people relate to. ♠

*For more information about Paul Anka and upcoming tour dates, visit [www.paulanka.com](http://www.paulanka.com).*