

Byrne closing jazz songbook for last time

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In a city bursting with jazz singers who know their way around the Great American Songbook, [Donna Byrne](#) has managed to impress the best in the business.



Tony Bennett called her “the real McCoy.” Pianist Dave McKenna said she was one of his favorite singers. Dave Frishberg, Scott Hamilton, Stanley Turrentine and Ruby Braff all made a point of working with her.

But when Byrne puts her microphone back into its stand tonight after her second set at Scullers, it won’t be merely the close of another club date. It will mark the end of a career for one of Boston’s vocal treasures.

“It just feels like it’s time for me,” said the Everett-born singer, a South Shore resident for more than 20

years. “I kind of wanted to say thank you and goodbye while I was still on top of my game.”

For Byrne, XX years old, it was the modern music game itself that convinced her to call it a day after more than three decades.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m trying to sell leprosy,” she said with a laugh during a phone conversation from her home in Norwell. “The opportunities to perform with regularity are not there now. I’ve kept all my set lists from every place I’ve ever worked, and a calendar book of the dates for tax reasons, and I just see less and less ink in the book every year.

“The whole thing has changed. I started singing as self-expression, a way of carrying forth what I consider the torch of quality music. But the scene stopped making sense for me.”

With a fluid, dusky voice that conjures up a rainbow of emotions with deceptive ease, Byrne has long been a favorite of listeners who like their jazz swinging and their lyrics laced with passion. She showcased her skills on a slew of albums over the years that also featured her husband, bassist Marshall Wood, and onstage in clubs from Manhattan to Hawaii.

But Byrne now says she's ready to move away from a music business that feels increasingly alien.

"I'm sort of responding to things in the world," she said. "I know I must sound like an old biddy, but I can't turn on my television without being horrified at what people call music now. I said to someone recently that if Judy Garland were alive and well today, she could not be sold unless she had body piercings and tattoos and sang dressed in a scantily clad outfit.

"It saddens me so much for (future) generations, that they'll have to work very hard to be exposed to anything of value and staying power. I don't think you'll ever hear music as beautiful as jazz's Great American Songbook."

What will life after tonight bring?

Byrne said family, friends and a slew of hobbies will keep her busy. But she admits she doesn't have a specific plan for her post-jazz life.

"I'm not sure about what I'm going to do," Byrne said. "I kind of want to step back and take a breath of fresh air. Everyone who has communicated to me has been enormously generous. (Club owners) have said, 'Please don't think that the door is shut for you. If you ever want to return, we'll be here.' Never say never, but I have no further plans to sing. I just need to step back and think about who I want to be until now and the Grim Reaper. But it's all been lovely."

Donna Byrne, at [Scullers](#), tonight at 8 and 10. Tickets: \$20; 617-562-4111.