

James Darren's musical "Trek"

A guest spot on "Deep Space Nine" sent his musical career flying to the moon

By Lori Hoffman: September 2001



Photo: Michael Hiller

A few years ago, James Darren was content with his career as a busy TV director and occasional TV guest star, when he happened to be at the same Hollywood function as "*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*" executive producer, Ira Steven Behr. Behr decided Darren would be perfect casting for a guest-starring role on the series as Vegas lounge singer Vic Fontaine. Still, Behr was told by a friend at the party he would look foolish if he approached Darren about the part.

In a phone interview from Los Angeles, Darren admitted that some time later when his agent suggested he take the part, he flat out refused – several times. "When I heard it was a singer, I said no." Darren's agent convinced him to at least display the courtesy of reading the script. "So I read the script, and it was so good. It reminded me of the old days at the Sands in Vegas. The cast was so great to work with. My first day on set, I felt like I had been there forever."

Looking debonair in his tux and sounding great as the holosuite lounge singer, circa Las Vegas 1962, Vic Fontaine was also father, confessor and matchmaker to various members of the *Deep Space Nine* crew. He was an immediate smash hit with the fans. A one-shot spot turned into a 10-episode story arc that re-launched his singing career.

"It all came from *Star Trek*," says Darren. "The head of Concord Records is a trekker. He saw me on the show and wanted to release a CD of the songs I sang." Darren re-recorded his *Trek* favorites including "The Way You Look Tonight", "Come Fly With Me", "I've Got the World on a String", "I'll Be Seeing You", "I've Got You Under My Skin", and "It's Only a Paper Moon" for the Concord Jazz release, *This One's From The Heart*. "It did really well," says Darren. "Those [*Star Trek*] fans are extremely supportive."

Darren's musical career is still at warp nine. His latest Concord jazz release, *Because Of You*, is No 5 on the *Billboard* Jazz chart. Darren went on to explain, "I've taken some relatively standard songs and done them in a totally different vein." The songs include fresh takes on a Sinatra favorite, "Just One of Those Things," the Frankie Valli hit "Can't Take My Eyes Off You" the Tony Bennett title track "Because Of You", and "I Love You More Today," originally recorded by Spiral Staircase.

"This is a bizarre business. After I directed the final episode of *T.J. Hooker* (a show he co-starred in with William Shatner, another *Star Trek* connection), then everybody thought of me

as a director. “Let’s get Jimmy to direct.” Then I play Vic Fontaine and suddenly I’m a singer again. The perception changes depending on what you did last.” Because of his heavy touring schedule, Darren isn’t looking for any acting or directing jobs right now. “With a CD out and playing the clubs, I’m too busy. When the time is right, I’ll start looking again. I’d love to do a series.”

James Darren, born James William Ercolani on June 8, 1936 in Philadelphia, has had some amazing swings in his career. He was a teenage heartthrob, thanks to co-starring in three *Gidget* films, and still has young kids today who think of him as Moondoggie. He also acted in the fine films *The Guns of Navarone*, *Operation Mad Ball*, and *Let No Man Write My Epitaph*.

Then Darren had his first trip to the musical hit parade with “Goodbye Cruel World”, and “Her Royal Majesty”. This led to gigs in Vegas. He had his first sci-fi success with the TV series “*The Time Tunnel*” in 1966; it only lasted a season but has been revised most recently on the Sci-Fi Channel. After doing lots of TV in the 70’s and 80’s including *T.J. Hooker*, he developed his respected career as a TV director, then came *Deep Space Nine* and a full-circle return to singing. “I started singing in and around Philly as a non-professional when I was 14. My dad would take me to bars and clubs like Palumbo’s. He had a lot of friends who were comics or emcees, and they’d tell him, “bring Jimmy in one night” any place they’d let me sing, I’d go.”

He was equally passionate about his acting career. “I dreamed of being a movie star. I’d play act all around the house.” He got serious about his acting career and commuted daily to New York from Philadelphia to study with the legendary Stella Adler, Brando’s mentor from the Actors’ Studio. Then he got his first big break and was signed by Columbia Pictures.

Like all of us, Darren has been touched by the horrible terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C. A friend who was flying to New York to see his nephew wed will instead be there to attend his nephew’s funeral – he was one of the World Trade Center victims’. The friend will then come down to Atlantic City to see Darren’s show with the man’s mother. “That will be tough.” admits Darren. Like the rest of us, James Darren will be getting back to work, doing his part by bringing a much needed night of entertainment to his diverse collection of fans.