

Entertainer returns to his first love – music

By Barbara Scherzer

Crooner James Darren is bringing his bi band sound back to Las Vegas. For his upcoming show at the Orleans, audiences can expect to hear many of the golden standards such as “I’ve Got You Under My Skin”, “The Best is Yet to Come”, or “I’ve Only Got Eyes for You”. The former teen idol is still blessed with a resonant voice, and is backed by a 16-piece live orchestra comprised mostly of local musicians.

“What’s happened, nobody’s using a big band anymore.” He explains. “Not so much in demand. No one’s recording big band records. These guys just love to play; if they’re free, they’ll be there.”

During his 90-minute performance he also plans to highlight some of his early movies: golden oldies like “Gidget” or “The Guns of Navarone”. “I use a lot of clips in my show.” Darren adds. “My humor is a lot like Dean (Martin).”



Photo: Michael Hiller

Darren, who had a string of Top Ten Hits in the sixties including “Goodbye Cruel World” and “Her Royal Majesty”, calls Frank Sinatra his favorite singer of all time. Darren also admires Tony Bennett and dubs him “the killer”.

Darren’s first foray onto a Vegas stage was at the Sahara Hotel with the late comic Buddy Hackett, whom he met in 1970 at a nightclub. The pair hit it off and this one chance meeting led to a 12-year partnership. “We worked everywhere in the country, 40 weeks per year.” Darren says. “Burning up the path to entertainment. We were really good friends.”

Born 67 years ago in Philadelphia, Darren always yearned to burn a path to the stage.

His parents worked long hours as tailors in sweat shops. In the summer; they toiled on local farms. His entire family including one brother lived with his maternal grandmother. "I'm really grateful to my parents." Darren says. "They sent me to acting lessons and trumpet lessons. Every week they put aside two or three dollars for me to do this. When I was five or six years old, my grandmother would pay me a dime to sing for her neighbors. Then, she raised me to a quarter."

Besides the support of family members, Darren credits his success with being prepared. He studied acting with the renowned acting coach Stella Adler in New York City and was singing around Philly by the age of 12. His dad would take Darren to sing at local clubs.

One day he decided to get some headshot photographs made of himself. His photographer's secretary liked his looks and had a personal connection with someone highly placed at Columbia Pictures. When he went to pick up his proofs, she asked if he wanted to be an actor. "I'm not here to be a carpenter," he remembers joking.

Darren was soon winging his way to California and without a single screen test was quickly signed to a Columbia contract which led to his "Gidget" gig and the teen stardom that followed.

By 1982 Darren was offered a role in the television series "T.J. Hooker" and within four years began to diversify by directing episodic television. Among his many helming credits is everything from "Beverly Hills 90210" to "Silk Stalkings".

A decade of directing quickly passed. "I intended to go out as a director," he recalls. But fate stepped in. He was asked to guest star on the series "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine" as the hologram singer Vic Fontaine. His role proved popular and Darren was asked to return as a regular for the final full season of the program.

Then, a funny thing happened. His phone began to ring once again with offers of singing engagements. "I started getting a lot of dates," he says. "Symphonies throughout the country."

“Directing is a tremendously difficult job,” he admits. “A lot of responsibility. Singing is more of a joy. It’s about having fun. I’d like to do it everyday of the week.”

These days, Darren resides in Beverly Hills and his plate is full with live concert dates numbering about 25 a year. This leaves him plenty of time for personal life. All of his sons have a solid footing in the entertainment business. One is a reporter for “Inside Edition”, while another is a successful writer of screenplays. A third son resides in Nashville, where he writes music for BMI.

Darren credits his longevity in the business to many things. “Luck for sure,” he says. “To be able to produce, sing, and direct well. Also, personal relationships; and to bring the show in on budget and on time.”

Darren sings out at the Orleans Showroom on February 24-27 at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$38.50 - \$60.50. For information, call 365-7111.

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