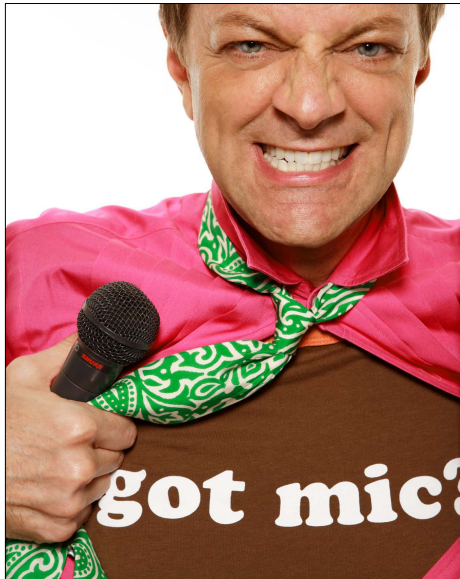


Cabaret Confessional

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Every Monday night at Birdland in New York City, Broadway and cabaret impresario Jim Caruso hosts a party like no other. Showbiz luminaries like Liza Minnelli, Chita Rivera and Michael Feinstein are known to sing a few tunes alongside up and coming performers at this weekly impromptu variety soiree.

Together with musical director Billy Stritch, Jim Caruso is taking the hugely popular open mic night to Los Angeles for the seventh time on February 29 and March 1 at the brand new venue, The Coterie at The Renaissance Hotel. Since the LA Cast Party premiered in 2010 with spectacular success, many stars including Melissa Manchester, Carol Channing, Cybill Shepherd, Dave Koz, Legally Blonde composers Larry O'Keefe & Nell Benjamin, Taylor Dayne, Jason Graae, Debby Boone, Shoshana Bean, Miranda Sing and many more have joined in on the fun. With the next LA Cast Party coming up, Jim Caruso talks all about the Cast Party and why it's one of the hottest tickets in town.

How would you describe the Cast Party in your own words?

Cast Party is an open mic for the Broadway, jazz, cabaret, pop, country, folk, comedy, polka and didgeridoo communities! It's been called the most 'extreme' open mic on the planet, because of the excellent musicianship, the wide variety of musical styles, and the occasional superstar drop-in!

The Cast Party is heading to LA for the third year. After having your first Cast Party there in 2010, how has it evolved and grown?

We were unbelievably lucky with the press the first time we took Cast Party to Los Angeles. There was a full-page colour feature in the Sunday LA Times, and Billy and I did three hours of ins-and-outs on the KTLA Morning TV show...it was kind of career-making! When we finally opened, there wasn't a seat to be had, and the talent was off-the-charts! My fingers are crossed that the same energy and support will continue at The Coterie.

In what ways are the performers and the audience members in LA different compared with your home crowd in New York City?

I've noticed that the audience is more intense in Los Angeles. Perhaps it's because our visits are sporadic – so it seems like a festive occasion when we get there! There's a very appreciative feeling of "We've been waiting for you!" There are so many brilliantly talented musical performers that have moved from NYC to make their mark in Hollywood, and I think Billy and I bring a little New York vibe to the scene! We're like two bagels on a plate of low-fat rice cakes, to misquote a famous movie...!

LA Cast Party is moving from the Magic Castle to The Coterie. Why did the venue change?

We did six successful rounds of Cast Party at The Magic Castle, and had a complete ball each time! Recently, though, they decided to forego musical acts and stick to a purely magical line-up, which I understand, considering the name of the place! I was so excited to get a call from my pal Julie Garnyé, who was putting together a musical series at The Coterie at The Renaissance Hotel, and booking friends like Lance Horne, Erich Bergen and James Barbour. I'm really looking forward to playing the room, and hopefully making it our west coast home!



What are some of your memorable moments and guests at the last six LA Cast Parties?

I have two words for you: Carol Channing. She and her sweet husband (who passed away last month) showed up at our last Party at The Magic Castle. I introduced her, and the crowd went ballistic – watching this legend making her way to the stage of an open mic night! We chatted for about 5 minutes – about arts education, showbiz, and the fact that all of her impersonators are men! All of a sudden, she launched into the “Let me go, Ephraim” monologue from Hello Dolly and I knew it was my cue to exit! Billy started playing some gorgeous chords, and she began a slow, unbelievably touching performance of “Before The Parade Passes By.” I sat like a stunned mullet, taking it all in, until I saw big tears streaming down Billy’s face as he was playing...then I was gone! There wasn’t a dry eye in the house as we watched this icon of the theatre roar that song with such ferocity and soul...and she did it about twelve inches from her audience. I will never forget it as long as I live, and neither will anyone else in that room.

You’ve taken the Cast Party on the road to many cities over the years with your long time musical director Billy Stritch. Do they work as well out of town as they do in NYC?

Somebody asked me if I was afraid to be celebrating local talent in places other than New York City. The concept of Manhattan having a lock on talented people is a completely crazy notion. Broadway performers weren’t born on 42nd Street...everyone’s from somewhere! Each city we’ve taken Cast Party - Chicago, LA, Las Vegas, Austin, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Orlando to say nothing of the high seas - is blessed with some extraordinary talent! There are always wonderful theatre, jazz, and pop singers, along with a few wacky acts to mix it up a bit!

What are you looking forward to the most for this Cast Party in LA?

Considering it’s currently 17 degrees in NYC, I’m looking forward to some sun! I can’t wait to see some of my LA peeps, and eat some honest-to-gawd Mexican food! Of course, I’m really excited to see just who shows up to sing for us! Folks like Melissa Manchester, Liza Minnelli, Sam Harris, Chita Rivera, Cheyenne Jackson, and Donny Osmond have been known to warble a tune, so who knows who will be grabbing the mic this time!

If you could have anyone at your LA Cast Party, who would you like to turn up?

Of course, I have some dream guests. Right up front, I’ll say Carol Burnett and Dick Van Dyke...I grew up watching, loving and obsessing over them, but I promise I won’t gush. Of course, Hollywood is filled with TV stars with Broadway backgrounds, and it’d be a kick to have Neil Patrick Harris, Jesse Tyler Ferguson and Sean Hayes visit. Would it kill Kathy Griffin to show up? I know her and think she’s a genius. Kathy...can you hear me? Throw in one or two Kardashians. I have no idea what any of them DO, but am pretty sure it’d equal good press! Something tells me at least one of them sings “Defying Gravity.”

Is there any chance of you bringing The Cast Party to Australia soon?

Nothing would please me more! I spent one of the best weeks of my life in Sydney, and can't wait to return! I know there's brilliant talent, too, because so many performers and WAAPA students have made their way into Birdland. Trust me, mate, Billy and I are packed, properly hydrated and ready for that 20-hour flight to Oz!