



The Great Caruso

By David Noh

Also out with a new CD, "The Swing Set," is New York nightlife impresario Jim Caruso, whose percolating "Cast Party" every Monday night at Birdland always attracts, as he is often wont to say, "some of the world's greatest singers...and other people." It's a sprightly, feel-good compilation of songs, with a dream backup band, including Bucky Pizzarelli, Warren Vache, Tedd Firth, and Aaron Weinstein.

The effervescent Caruso said, "This all came about because of Michael Croiter, Chita Rivera's drummer, who has a new record label, Yellow Sound, who suggested I do another CD, and Aaron Weinstein, this crazy brilliant 24-year-old violinist, who volunteered to produce and arrange it. All these great musicians I've known and worked with were kvelling over his charts, perfectly notated and printed on that great heavy paper, saying, 'Holy hell, these are gorgeous!' All I had to do was show up and, hopefully, sing in tune."

One of the tracks is "I Love a Violin," made famous by the great Kay Thompson, whose genius was celebrated in Liza Minnelli's last show, in which Caruso was a backup performer. "Kay was such a gigantic part of my life, a great friend. When she moved in with [her goddaughter] Liza, I was there organizing Liza's amazing photo collection — she kept everything — and Kay would just talk. She would clam up if you asked questions, didn't want you to know too much, but she liked to impart stuff, and we would watch a movie like 'Funny Face,' and she would freeze the screen and tell a story about [co-stars] Audrey Hepburn, whom she loved, or Fred Astaire, who I think was jealous of her talent, and also she wasn't his kind of dame. He liked softer, fluffier girls he could control, and nobody could control Kay.

"Even though she was in her 80s and never left the house, she still knew everything, loved listening to Sting's music, and once asked me to find her some tapes of monks chanting. I managed to locate one, and she was so grateful and played it non-stop, which I'm not sure Liza was too crazy about — monks chanting in the middle of all those Warhols, Angelo Donghia furniture, and Elsa Peretti. Then that hit record by Enigma came out, and I was like, 'Kay! How did you know?' She just said, 'Everything else has been done. I figured it was time for monks!'"

Caruso met Minnelli through his BFF, Billy Stritch, who met her when he first arrived in New York, playing piano at Bobo's one night when she was there with Chita Rivera: "Liza kept looking up and asked, 'Who's that guy playing those great chords?' Chita said, 'Oh, that's Billy Stritch. He's great!' All of a sudden Liza got up and sat next to him on the piano bench, and they started talking. Billy called me that night and said,

'You're not going to believe this, and she's coming to hear me play at Eighty Eight's tomorrow!' I was like, 'Billy, please...' but there she was the next day! I was seated next to her so I could hear everything she said — she was doing Radio City and was looking for a new sound — and she hired him to do the vocal arrangements that day. I thanked her for being so nice to my friend, and she invited me to her birthday party at Tabu the next night. All roads lead to Billy, and she's been an unbelievable supporter of ours for 20 years now in March."

"Cast Party" is a logical extension of Caruso's childhood dream in his native Pittsburgh of having his own variety show, like Carol Burnett or Dick Van Dyke: "I wake up every Monday like it's my birthday. Of course, there are those nights of horror, like the guy with no teeth who yodels Elvis tunes, but then you get Marilyn Maye, Tony Bennett, or Jon Bon Jovi coming in. The terrible or the brilliant are fantastic, but the mediocre will kill you, like when everybody just sings in tune something from their audition book. Help me! The Den of Non-Equity!"



And then there was the night Caruso's idol, Donny Osmond, popped in just before his own Christmas show: "We were in the dressing room when we heard a pounding on the door, and he jumps in like a kid of 15: 'I'm here and so excited!' Hilary Kole almost passed out. 'Why is Donny Osmond in our dressing room?' Later, when we were onstage, Donny jumped onstage, grabbed a mic, threw his arm around me, and started singing harmony. The audience went ballistic and, as they were screaming, he ran offstage, grabbed his coat from the bar, said, 'I'm late. Bye!,' and ran out — a Donny Osmond drive-by."

"Cast Party" would seem to be a natural for reality TV but costly song rights have proven a bugaboo, although Caruso's number-one get wish for his party is Bravo producer Andy Cohen. (If you're out there, come on over!) Caruso's been so busy promoting other performers he forgot to save a night at Birdland for his own CD release, but fear not. On February 17, he's hosting a Town Hall benefit for Broadway Cares, with a lineup consisting of, among others, Rivera, Maye, Kole, Stritch, Mayes, Christopher Sieber, Sally Mayes, Klea Blackhurst, and, oh yeah, Liza! (123 W. 43rd St., 8 p.m.; \$25-\$60 at siegelpresents.com)