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Any number of Strip stars could pop in to Caruso's 'Cast Party' at the Smith Center



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A version of this column was posted on lasvegassun.com at 10:49 a.m. Tuesday.

Jim Caruso wants to be an Osmond. "I've always wanted to be adopted into that family," said the founder of the freewheeling "Cast Party," which takes Manhattan and (on great occasion) Las Vegas by storm. "I mean, who wouldn't want to be an Osmond?"

Caruso also wants to be a talk-show host. Not just any talk-show host, but a talk-show host in the spirit of Merv Griffin and Mike Douglas.

"Wouldn't that be fun?" he said. "I would have people on just because they were great guests."

Caruso wants a lot out of life. He's a busy bee, seesawing between New York and Las Vegas with his flight-of-fancy showcase. "Cast Party" is celebrating its 10th year overall and fifth presentation in Las Vegas dating to 2012.

At 9:30 tonight, the show is back at the Smith Center's Cabaret Jazz (tickets are \$20 and \$30 and available at the Smith Center website). This is the third presentation at the Smith Center after two performances at Alexis Park.

"We'd like to do this maybe once a quarter," Caruso said. "I mean, we're in such a beautiful room. I tell people in New York about this Cabaret Jazz room



and they can't believe it. They're like, 'That's in Las Vegas? Seriously?' It's a wonderful room."

The "Cast Party" format is easy to follow: Caruso and his pianist sidekick, the gifted and versatile Billy Stritch, assemble a loose list of performers who sing, dance, play the piano and otherwise entertain.

The lineup for tonight's show is not yet set. Those who have been summoned for shows in Las Vegas have included "Vegas! The Show" dancer Tara Palsha and fellow cast member Eric Jordan Young, Mark Shunock of "Rock of Ages," former "Jersey Boys" cast member (and a member of the cast of the upcoming "Jersey Boys" film) Erich Bergen, the vocal group Dangerous Curves, "Jazzin'" Jeannie Brie, Clint Holmes, the Phat Pack, "Jersey Boys" ensemble player Douglas Crawford, Frankie Moreno, Anne Martinez of "Dancing Queen," opera songstress Isabella Ivy, Maren Wade (now of "Vegas! The



PHOTOS BY SAM MORRIS

Top photo: Tara Palsha, accompanied by Bill Fayne, sings during a "Cast Party" at Cabaret Jazz at the Smith Center. Lower photo: Anne Martinez performs during the variety show.

Show"). Tina Walsh of "Mamma Mia!" and "Phantom — The Las Vegas Spectacular," Keith Thompson (co-founder of Composers Showcase and the music

director of "Jersey Boys") and, yes, one Donny Osmond.

"But Donny & Marie are dark when we are in town," Caruso said. "How selfish of them!"

Caruso is hoping to expand the breadth of "Cast Party" to include those who are not just singers, dancers and/or musicians.

"I like anything that makes the night different," said Caruso, a popular nightclub and cabaret performer who appeared on Broadway with Liza Minnelli in "Liza! at the Palace." "We'll take a great tap dancer, a jazz sax player, someone who comes in and swallows huge sculpting balloons, which we've had in New York, and it's truly disgusting. But a gymnast, contortionist, anything bizarre to make it wacky, we'll take."

Caruso pauses. "Oh, and we need an Elvis impressionist," he said. "We must have one of those."

Caruso started his performance career with his mother in a show titled "Son of a Bitch," which the duo showcased in clubs in his hometown of Dallas.

"I was in my 20s and had been doing a lot of theater but not getting roles other than part of the ensemble and Chorus Boy No. 3," he said. "I thought, 'How am I ever going to be Donny Osmond doing this? Well, my mom played great piano and we started 'Son of a Bitch,' and we played fish restaurants all over Dallas."

The results were ... "Fairly awful," Caruso said, "but it got me started. I was doing very inappropriate but self-important material looking at a stuffed shark on the wall. But that's where you learn your stuff, playing anywhere you can and working three hours a night."

And, someday, you rise to the level of playing not far from Donny & Marie's showroom — and a step closer to realizing your entertainment dream.

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