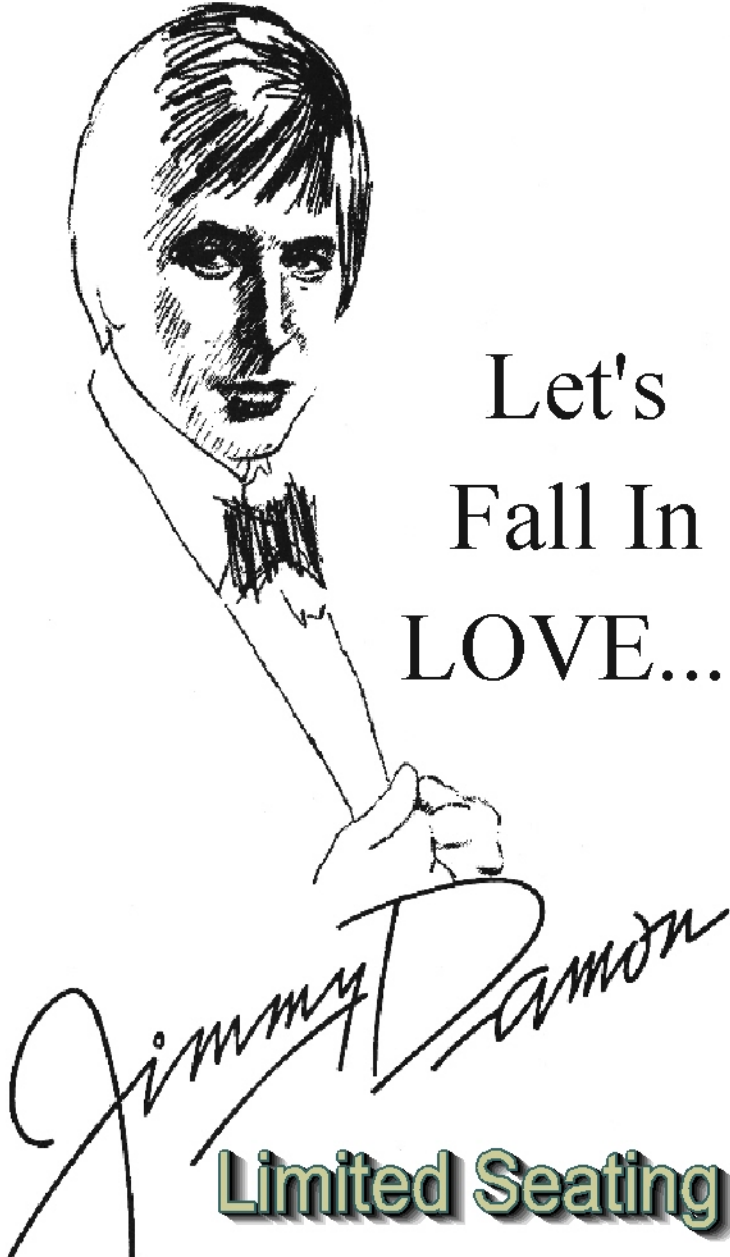


"Chicago's Best Returns"

Jimmy Damon, in a word... "Timeless"
Carla Gordon, Editor, Critic, Cabaret Scenes



Myles Greene
Musical Director



Let's
Fall In
LOVE...

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May 16, 1999-----

Cabaret singer Jimmy Damon can look out the east window of his 25th-floor Lake Point Tower condominium and see Chicago in harmony. But Lake Michigan is calm on a foggy afternoon. The Navy Pier Ferris wheel is empty.

And Jimmy Damon is alone.

This is a strange role for Damon, who has been singing in Chicago nightclubs since the early 1970s. Damon has sung for every Chicago mayor since the original Mayor Daley. He's the prototype for the polyester lounge singer developed by Bill Murray for "Saturday Night Live." Friends who walk through Damon's front door are greeted by a mechanical sunflower that sways and sings "You Are My Sunshine."

And Jimmy Damon feels alone.

But anyone who checks out Damon, headlining through next Saturday in the Metropole Room at the Fairmont Hotel will find his baritone is at the top of its game. This cat is cool. He's living nine lives.

"I grew up," Damon says, sitting down on a forest green sofa in his living room. "I was always in a hurry, pushing. The end of the world was coming today. Somehow I decided to relax. Something happened to me, and I don't what it was. Maybe I had a bad day and came home crying one night."

Has Damon done that before?

"Oh, yeah, lots," he answers without blinking either of his piercing green eyes. "It's a lonely world being who I am. I share it with my wife (of 27 years, Marilyn) and my kids (Dana, 25, Alexa, 20), but who I am is scary. I'm really by myself. If anybody really wants to know who I am, they can listen to my music and they'll probably get close to me.

"But I'm really by myself."

Damon is standing by himself in the dark corners of the Metropole Room. He's preparing to go on for his early 8:30 p.m. set on a Tuesday. Piano player Jerry Peters tells drummer John Yaccino, "OK, John, set it up, it's show time," and Damon's trio launches into the "Tonight Show" theme. After a long drum roll, the piano player roars, "And now, here's JIMMY!"

Smiling, Damon struts onto the dance floor. He wears a black tie, black jacket, slacks and black ostrich cowboy boots. This is the armor for a man who shines in the night. He begins singing a snappy version of "Come Fly With Me."

Damon is flying solo.

There's no one in the room besides a photographer, a reporter and the reporter's companion. The Metropole Room seats 100 people. There's 97 empty seats.

And Jimmy Damon is alone.

He slowly approaches a table where his only guests are seated. Damon begins singing Elvis Presley's 1961 hit "Can't Help Falling in Love." He leans over, stares into the eyes of the only female in the room and holds her hand. In turn, she holds her companion's hand. Gee.

What if the companion held Damon's other hand?

That would be a lounge-a-trois.

"I sing as though there's 100,000 people in front of me," Damon says later. "That's what I'm about. If there's just one person in the room, that might be the right person. You came to hear me sing, you're going to get it, babes. I don't hold back. I'll tell my story."

Jimmy Damon was born Jimmy Demopoulos in Memphis, Tenn. His father, Nick, ran the New York Cafe, a 24-hour restaurant about a mile from the birthplace of the Stax Records soul label.

Damon met local entertainers such as Presley, Stax singer Rufus "The Funky Chicken" Thomas and Johnny Cash at the cafe. His father's best friend was Wallace E. Johnson, founder of the Holiday Inn hotel chain. Lots of people stay at Holiday Inn. Alone.

Jimmy Demopoulos had his first success at 14 when he recorded the teen ballad "If I Had My Way" for Phillips International records in Memphis. Local bandleader Bill Justis - who had his own hit in 1957 with "Raunchy (1)" - heard Demopoulos sing and recommended the teenager to Sun Records founder Sam Phillips. The late Charlie Rich played piano on his session, and the Jordanaires sang background vocals.

At 16, he co-hosted a regional TV show and dance party called "The Big Beat." By 1957 Demopoulos had his own fan club. It consisted mostly of teenage girls. They came up with a motto: Push Demop to the top.

He thought Chicago could take him to the top.

He changed his name from Demopoulos to Damon in 1968, and left Memphis for Chicago three years later. Damon says, "At one time Chicago was the greatest

one-night city in America. All the conventions were here. Things were still alive. I played the Empire Room. Mister Kelly's. And I hit it lucky. I got on the Don McNeil Breakfast Club (in the Tip Top Tap of the Allerton Hotel). I had to wake up at 4 and sing at 6 in the morning."

Chicago author Bill Zehme encountered Damon through his wanderings into Frank Sinatra's world with his best-selling book *The Way You Wear Your Hat: Frank Sinatra and the Lost Art of Livin'*. In the last few years Damon has pegged some of his cabaret shows "My Way - Jimmy Damon sings Sinatra," a title approved by Sinatra. Damon also performs "My Way - and more," which goes beyond Frankdom to include material such as "Phantom of the Opera" and Neil Diamond's "September Morn."

Zehme says, "Christie Hefner is very keen on Jimmy. She made it a point to come to this Sinatra birthday party at Park West. It was bizarre because Sinatra hadn't been dead a year. Toward the end of that show Jimmy went into 'One For My Baby.' I grabbed a bottle of Jack Daniel's off the little wagon. I walked onstage and handed it to him. I don't know what possessed me.

"He doesn't exactly have that amber-coated demeanor. He's a southern guy! It's weird. Beyond the hair, his talent soars. It's a good voice. He must be doing something right because the Sinatras haven't broken his legs yet."

Jimmy Damon found his feet at the defunct Cousin's Club, a 1970s nightspot for subterranean swingers in the basement under Benihana of Tokyo, 166 E. Superior. Damon sang cabaret covers of Lou Rawls' "Lady Love" and John Denver's "Leavin' on a Jet Plane."

"Count Basie, Alan King, all the stars came to the Cousin's Club," Damon says. "People found love there. A priest and a nun were out for the first time after leaving the order. I sang 'It's Impossible.' They started talking to each other because of the song and ended up getting married.

"I started there with a weekend job that wound up being three years. I didn't know anything about singing for audiences in a nightclub setting. That's where I learned."

Damon became a stylist.

"I learned how to concentrate, because the crowds didn't pay attention when I started," he explains. "I learned how to get into the lyric and how to present myself. It takes a long time. I learned how to phrase, I learned how to stand. I learned how to look you in the face and tell you a truth. An audience can spot a phony anytime. And what I've learned over the years is that I'm fallible. . . . You just realize you're real."

According to published reports, Damon was 16 in 1957 when he co-hosted "The

Big Beat" in Memphis, which means he's at least 57 years old. A visitor hedges and guesses he's at least 53. Damon looks the visitor in the face and nervously answers, "Right.

"I'm about 48. Yes."

Time goes by. When Damon was in Memphis, he would sing with the Ted Weems Band and interpret "As Time Goes By" through sweeping rock 'n' roll phrases that were so much a part of Memphis in the mid-1950s. "The words in that song are now so much more important," Damon says. "I even appreciate the comma in a phrase, because now that comma is a big statement to me."

This panache is what inspired Bill Murray's re-interpretation of Damon as "Nick the Lounge Singer" for "Saturday Night Live." In 1979 Chicago producer Lou Volpano was booking ChicagoFest. The Blues Brothers (John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd) played opening night.

"John and Dan bought the (private) blues bar behind the Earl (of Old Town)," Volpano says from Los Angeles, where he is a producer. "One night Belushi, Murray and I walk out of the bar to Second City. We wanted to see the late show. Damon was working That Steak Joynt. His name was in the window and I said, 'You guys, we gotta go see Jimmy Damon.' Murray really didn't react at the time, but afterward he kept making big jokes about it.

"And it ended up on SNL as Nick the Lounge Singer. Murray didn't start singing 'Starrrr Wars . . .' but he looked at Damon and said, 'Come on . . .' The funny thing is that Damon thinks it's a compliment."

Damon says, "It wasn't me, but it was a big exaggeration. I'd love for Bill Murray to say 'Yeah,' and send me some cash."

Volpano remains tight with Damon. He thinks Damon could bust out in a big way in Hollywood. "Jimmy Damon is one of the undiscovered things in Chicago," he says. "Nobody has had the cajones to get up and do anything about it. I'm trying to get him booked into the Lucky Seven (at Hollywood & Vine) where the real martini Rat Pack crowd hangs out. I told Jimmy, 'Dude, one night in this place and when people see you and realize you're the real thing . . . man!' Jimmy Damon is not some act. That's real. He's really real."

Lake Point Tower is a real obvious locale for Damon's digs. He's as synonymous with Chicago as Cubs slugger Sammy Sosa, who also lives in Lake Point Tower. Mayor Harold Washington once said, "Entertainers like Jimmy Damon have helped Chicago's image as a swinging town."

Damon's 25th-floor neighbors have included actor Tom Cruise, who rented a condo during the filming of "The Color of Money." Damon has lived on the 25th

floor since 1976.

A stereo system rests near the window that overlooks Lake Michigan. Damon pulls out a stack of CDs. They include Bob Dylan's "Time Out of Mind," "The Baja Sessions" by Chris Isaak, Madonna's "Bedtime Stories," lots of Frank Sinatra and even Greek Bouzoukis music.

The walls near the front door are adorned with pictures of Frank Sinatra, Mike Ditka and others. Also in prominent positions are pictures of the Damons' pet poodles, Star and Cruise - named in honor of their former neighbor. "They went to heaven too early in their career," Damon says. He seems uncomfortable. "I'm really strange about this," he says. "I don't allow too many people in my house."

When Jimmy Damon is alone, he loves his pet fish.

He especially loves pet fish who don't up and leave him.

"This is a new breed of fish," Damon says, pointing to an aquarium full of small red fish darting around the water like barroom eyes at last call. "It's called a Red Parrot. The thing is, they live long. I'm so tired of buying fish that die in a year and a half. These fish are crossbred. They can't make babies. They're like mules, you know how a horse and a donkey makes a mule?"

Sure, Jimmy.

Ain't life a kick in the ass?

Although Damon was born in Memphis, he is uniquely Chicago. He understands what makes the city click.

Damon says, "Going to New York is like going to your first cousin you haven't met in a long time. You know you're related, but you're a little nervous. And I've been very successful in New York. I opened a season at the Plaza Hotel. I can tell you when New York makes you a star, you know you are a star. But New York just wasn't me.

"Chicago is like coming home to your grandmother's house. You're always welcome there. You like the smell, you like the cooking. Chicago's that kind of warmth." Jimmy Damon stands alone and looks out the window.

It's cold outside.