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LAS VEGAS--- The ring-a-ding plug has been pulled on the electric Sammy Davis Jr. His shows are no longer spiced by show-biz Latin; his kooky mannerisms have progressed past the lampshade.

Dig?

Of course, he still carries the sartorial splendor of vintage Sammala. In a recent show with Bill Cosby at Caesars Palace here, Davis strolled onto the stage looking like a high-roller in "Miami Vice." He wore a chocolate brown jacket over a chlorinated blue Hawaiian shirt. A silver bracelet circled his left hand. Three large rings dwarfed his right hand. The gold chain graced his neck.

Of course, he still does some of the Sammala schmooze. After Cos warned that Sammy should "keep an eye out for things," Sammala commented on Cosby's Temple University orange sweatpants - "I've heard of buns man, but you've got the whole bakery back there."

But early in his set, Sammy got real serious.

He told a standing room-only audience, including George Burns and producer David Wolper, "I'm glad you chose this period of my life to come see me because it's the best I've ever had. I used to take it all too seriously. Now I've cut out the theatrical comedy, although this Davis showed the audience the rings on his right hand) is still OK.

"It's all paid for."

The 61-year-old Davis has earned purity through panache.

In a backstage interview between shows, Davis said, "If you've been in the business as long as I have and whatever personal devils you have - drink, drugs, or hanging out late - and I've had them all - when you get rid of that, you suddenly start to like yourself.

"One thing that turned me around was seeing guys doing me - Billy Crystal and the rest of them," Davis said as he dramatically lowered his voice. "The whole 'Hey, babe. Peace and love and right on, daddy.' I looked at that and said, 'Jesus, I don't want to be like that.' I had to clean that up. I knew what they were doing was true 10 years ago. But if I had to be there today, I wouldn't be able to perform. I want to go out now and work. I want to trim the fat. There's no law against being theatrical, because that's part of my breeding, part of my background. But cut it to a minimum and go out and just entertain.

"I'm in the position of being one of the few down-front, non-laser beam performers around," Davis said. "You have to capitalize on that. And I find the young people appreciate looking at it and saying, 'Yeah, that ain't like the impressions we saw.' And I get that more than anything else, which lets me know I'm on the right track. There's a feeling when I walk on the stage that I never felt before. No publicity can do it for you. There's kind of a warmth and rapport that happens. If you're phony, they're never going to buy it. Audiences are too smart today."

So when Davis appears with Sarah Vaughan at the Chicago Theatre (he will sing the National Anthem for the April 7 Cubs opener, too), he can be expected to give a high-octane evening long on form and short on foolishness.

During his hourlong set at Caesars, he offered a great deal of classic Davis such as "Hey, There," "Lady Is a Tramp" and "Birth of the Blues." His voice (unlike pal Frank Sinatra's) showed remarkable range for his age. Davis's phrasing was precise, and his delivery was full of renewed passion. The only thing missing was his expressive vaudeville jig, which he saved for the closer, "Mr. Bojangles." Davis, under one spotlight, donned a derby and began the Jerry Jeff Walker tune with a gentle whistle before breaking into song and then spirited dance. (Backstage, Davis limped ever so slightly.)

Davis even reached back for the zany imitations that anchored his 1954 debut album, "Starring Sammy Davis Jr." At Caesars he sang an elongated "As Time Goes By," by way of Humphrey Bogart, Jimmy Stewart, James Cagney, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. "You catch three shows in Chicago, you will see the skeleton of the show," Davis said. " 'Candy Man,' 'Bojangles,' that I gotta do. But what happens in between is totally different every night. I gotta keep it flexible and fun for me."

Davis is resurrecting a foundation that was established as early as 1932.

In his 1965 autobiography, *Yes I Can: The Story of Sammy Davis Jr.*, he wrote, "I'd seen a lot of show business by standing in the wings watching the other acts (appearing with his father who was a lead dancer with Will Mastin) in the theater, and I couldn't fail to learn from them. I'd been onstage for almost four of my seven years, and I was developing a feeling for 'timing.' I could watch other acts perform and anticipate when a gesture, a fall or an attitude would or would not work. I remembered everything I saw."

A friend had told me Davis displayed uncanny pacing and swing in concert last summer at the Hollywood Bowl. The Caesars concert appeared to be just as vital, almost as if Davis was rockin' with redemption.

"That was the first time Hollywood had ever seen me as I am," Davis said of the Hollywood Bowl show. "And I was rediscovered. Buddy Rich and I did the show

together, and we realized it was one of those nights that if you tried to put it together again, you couldn't. That night the skies were all in the right place, the sound was magnificent, and there were 14,000 people in the audience. I didn't expect that. Nobody did, and we cooked. And I got off at the right time, and I didn't try to milk it, which I would've done in the old days, (with) three encores.

"I'm very happy with Sammy Davis Jr.," Davis said. "Not ego-tripping, but I've worked all my life to do this. It's not the have-all, be-all of existence, because it isn't."

Davis then whispered, "But it used to be.

"Subsequently when I got offstage, I used to do everything I could to make up for that. Now when I'm done, I just go to my place, do my cooking. It's beautiful. I'm not afraid to be alone - in the old days I used to be. I was terribly afraid to be alone, so I had to have 72 running buddies."

The best-known buddies formed the fabled Hollywood Rat Pack, a collection of hipster saints brought together by Humphrey Bogart, the group's "director of public relations." Bogie once explained the philosophy of the group as, "You might say that rats are for staying up late and drinking lots of booze. We're against squares and being bored and for lots of fun and being real rats." That call enticed charter characters such as Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Peter Lawford, Joey Bishop and Davis, the self-ordained "greatest Jewish Mau-Mau dancer of all time."

The woman's auxiliary was well-represented by the likes of Lauren Bacall, Marilyn Monroe, Shirley MacLaine and Angie Dickinson.

There are far too many Rat Pack fables to go into here (you can experience one yourself the next time Channel 9 shows "Ocean's Eleven," a Sinatra concept to get himself, Sammy, Dino, Joey, Peter and Angie all into one movie) - except for Noel Coward's 1955 debut at the Sands Hotel.

Legend has it that Sinatra chartered buses and planes to bring other Hollywood kuklas such as Judy Garland, David Niven and Ernie Kovacs to Las Vegas.

The Rat Pack took over most of the rooms on one floor of the Sands, anchored by a huge communal suite. Different activities were planned for each room, and Rat Pack members were required to wear corresponding arm bands for each activity. The party began with 300 Bloody Marys ordered through room service. It has been reported the weekend lasted all week.

Davis would not confirm or deny the report.

"We were all younger then, and we could afford the luxury," Davis said. "What we did by comparison to what the kids do now was dull. We thought we were hot stuff,

and we were - for the late '50s and early '60s.

"But now, the cat's just sayin', 'Hello, man,' " Davis said with a laugh as he squinted in true Sammy style.

"You go into a bar now on a Tuesday, and they're doing more than we ever did," Davis said. "But it was the time, and we had fun. But I don't think we did anything to hurt anybody. There's a bunch of people who were bigger than all of us that ain't around no more."

It was the heavy smoking and hard drinking with the Rat Pack that sent Davis to the hospital in 1974 with liver and kidney trouble and chest pains. In 1983, after a second and more serious bout with liver disease, he swore off booze. Davis told the Caesars audience, "Last November I celebrated three years of sobriety."

Davis said he has heard of a potential Rat Pack reunion, a rumor usually generated by Sinatra. "I know that every time Frank works someplace, the next thing you hear is that he's going to bring Sammy and Dean with him next time," Davis said. "It would be a ball to do it in Chicago. The last time we all worked together in Chicago was at the Villa Venice. And we all did a Martin Luther King benefit at the Stadium. We've all got interconnecting histories with Chicago."

Davis cut many of his theatrical teeth in Chicago.

"When I got out of the Army in 1945, I started in Chicago at burlesque houses and the Ritz Hotel," Davis said. "My dad and I got stranded in Chicago for a year and a half, thanks to some people who owned the Ritz and a man by the name of O. C. Wilson, who was one of the big gamblers on the South Side. He was a friend of my dad's, and he stood for our rooms. My dad cut the poker games, and that's how he made a few bucks. We couldn't get a job. That's when the black clubs were hot - the Rum Boogie and the De Lisa. We'd go in and see the shows, but we were too vaudeville for them.

"Finally, there was an act called the Wesson Brothers, who were headlining at the Chez Paree," Davis said. "We had grown up together, and they invited me in. They asked how things were goin' and they could see things weren't goin' too well. They called up Mickey Rooney's manager and got us a date, sight unseen, as Mickey's opening act. We joined them in Boston and came back to Chicago at the Oriental and did seven shows a day.

"Seven shows a day," Davis repeated. "They couldn't run the movie. Mickey was that hot. First show was 9:30 in the morning, and there was 45 minutes between each show. Seven shows. And happy to do them. Do you hear me? Happy to do them!

"We got \$500 net and I'll never forget that," Davis said with a laugh. "And then we'd

have friends come down after the show. 'Wooh, we're with Mickey Rooney!' And we'd get a little three-sheeted."

While on the road, Davis met Sinatra, who was singing with Tommy Dorsey's band, and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson.

Davis was best known in Chicago for his appearances at the legendary Regal Theater. He headlined with Louis Jordan, Lionel Hampton and Johnny Otis. The first time he played the Chicago Theatre, he shared the bill with Dinah Shore.

One of the more poignant Davis stories in a Chicago setting deals with his removing his flashy rings one by one during a 1968 performance of Clifford Odets' play "Golden Boy," and later in the early '70s, at an Operation PUSH benefit.

The gesture signified sincerity toward his black audience.

In the late '60s and early '70s, Davis was heavily criticized by the black press for 'tomming it,' notably after the registered Democrat allowed himself to be photographed with President Nixon during the 1972 Republican convention.

"We were doing 'Golden Boy' and because of the subject matter of the show - the relationship between the white girl and the black guy - some brothers and sisters in the balcony resented it," Davis said. "So I had to let them know this was a show. The line of communication was never broken. My people in Chicago have always been supportive of me.

"A lot of the civil rights benefits and other benefits I did were not popular at the time," Davis said. (He also helped raise money for the defense fund for jailed militant Marxist Angela Davis.) "They are popular now. Times change us. Like with Dr. King. We all made a commitment to Dr. King, and I was probably last on the list. Thanks to Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier, who introduced me to him, we finally became friends. We were able to make some important moves.

"Somewhere along the line the saving grace has been that the public liked you and you were true to that liking in your fashion," Davis reflected. "I learned a lot during those years. A lot of it was painful, but it was only my pain."

In "Yes I Can," he described himself as his marriage to Loray White was drifting apart in 1959 (it lasted less than a year).

Davis wrote, "I was the man who'd missed the smiles of a thousand, obsessed by the sneer of one; who'd listened for drums and never heard the concerto; who'd focused on the faces of hatred in a closeup, a hundred times their size; who'd tried to find everything I desired by searching for everything I did not."

"Those mistakes were nobody else's," Davis recounted. "I made the mistakes, but I

never made the same mistake twice.

"Having writ, move on."