



Can you hear the **corks** popping? That's the sound of **celebration**. W42ST is one year old today. **Yay!** for us. For those of you who've followed us from the **beginning**, thank you from the bottom of our hearts. To you **newbies**, hey, let's be friends. To mark our **birthday**, we're having a bake-off with our favorite bakeries, having a Broadway **party** with Jim Caruso, and pushing the **gravy** boat out for Thanksgiving. Won't you join us? We'd love it if you would.

W42ST is a start-up business that needs your support. If after reading about a service in the magazine or on our social media, you give them a try, let them know. Tell them face-to-face, or on social media use the #W42STSENTME hashtag.

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Our favorite neighborhood bakeries have been mixing and measuring all month to create these spectacular birthday treats.

His open mic night hosts everyone from Liza Minnelli to Jon Bon Jovi to Donny Osmond. But Jim Caruso is the real star of the show, writes **Ruth Walker**

He asked his parents for an agent at the tender age of six. As a teenager, he wanted to be Donny Osmond. But it wasn't until Jim Caruso started putting other people in the spotlight that he himself was truly able to shine.

"I've struggled my whole life," says the host of Jim Caruso's Cast Party, the Monday night open mic night at Birdland that has been running for 13 years. "All I wanted to do was be a singer. I wanted to be one of those kids on *Tiger Beat* magazine. That didn't happen.

"Then I was living in Dallas and all my friends started to get their equity card, their union card, the national tours. I'd audition for those things. Didn't get them.

"So I put a club act together so that I could be the star of some show, even if it was my own. With seven people in the audience. I struggled.

"But literally the second I took the spotlight away from myself and put it on other people, even just a little bit, people found me more interesting. I wish somebody would have told me a long time ago! But that was a great learning experience, that it doesn't have to be all about you."

Cast Party is the ultimate in live variety, when Broadway takes its Monday night off and its stars skip along to W44th St for a little off-duty fun and games.

"It's everyone from Liza Minnelli, Chita Rivera, big stars, to up-and-coming songwriters, Broadway performers that are also comedians – like Julie Halston, tap dancers, leads, chorus kids.

"There's always someone. We start at 9.45pm and there are nights at 9.30pm when I have three people on the list and I'm like: 'Oh my God! It's over. Well, 13 years was a good run. Time to find another job!' Then in 15 minutes I'll have 25 people on the list. There's always somebody so extraordinary. Jane Monheit this last week, the week before Kurt Elling, one of the major jazz singers of the universe. Marilyn Maye. Natalie Cole. I mean, like, it's really impressive."

"If you're Liza Minnelli they clap. If you're the crazy lady that wrote a song about her feet, they clap just as hard."

But don't Broadway performers actually want a night off, I wonder?

"Isn't that interesting? It's always in those MGM movies too – all the kids get together after the show and sing around the piano. I don't know why that is. I guess everybody's an entertainer at heart and a bit of a show-off and we want to entertain our friends and hang out."

For audiences, we get to see a unique New York experience. And it's nothing if not democratic. "If you're Liza Minnelli they clap. If you're the crazy lady that wrote a song about her feet that followed Liza Minnelli once, they clap just as hard.

"It's like the *Ed Sullivan Show*, which had the Beatles and Streisand and people at the peak or the beginning of the peak of their career, and then a guy juggling plates. And I love that variety. We don't see too much of it any more and I really miss it."

He and his best friend and musical director Billy Stritch have taken the show all over the world – to LA, Las Vegas, London – but his dream would be to take it to an even wider audience: on the television.

"It's the original variety format, without the snarky, bitchy quality that some of the judged shows have.

"Believe me, I love sarcasm, and I love a snarkfest. But not on stage. I don't feel that's my job as the host. We go to the diner afterwards and, yes, the gloves come off, and that's really fun.

"We've ended up at the Renaissance Diner almost every Monday for the past 13 years. How sad? Or nice. I'm not sure ... Sometimes we'll have a long table in the back room, the fireplace is going in the

That's me in the
SPOTLIGHT....

IMAGE: DUSTIN COHEN

CABARET

winter, it's hilarious, it really is. Til 4am we'll sit there and laugh and bitch and moan and complain. Then Tuesday, of course, is like my lost weekend. I'm walking around in a bathrobe and a coffee cup til 7pm. It's pathetic. THAT'S the TV show! Watching Jim age before your eyes."

He tells the tales with a twinkle in his eye, and a sense of disbelief that he's landed himself such a gift of a gig. It was almost an accident, a twist of fate, that it happened in the first place. "I'd decided to give up showbusiness. Showbusiness was furious. Showbusiness didn't care. So I got this job working for a nightclub and I was literally writing press releases for drinks specials. I wanted to shoot myself."

"There was a piano, so I decided to throw a party one Christmas. I have a lot of great friends, and everybody came. We all went up to the piano, as everybody in our business does somehow, and people stayed til 4am. They were drinking and eating and the nightclub had never seen a pile of people like this before."

"The next day they called and asked if we'd do it again, every Monday. And I said: 'No. Why would I do that? That's crazy."

"Cut to 13 years later, we're still doing it every Monday. We've missed very few Mondays in those years."

But success was a long time coming. In a long and varied career, Caruso has sold rubber stamps. "That was riveting." He was a professional clown. "Entertaining ... no, annoying ... children of all ages." But if that business they call show ever runs dry, he'll always have those balloon animals to fall back on. "I made them till the skin on my fingers would crack, because they're dry and have that powdery stuff on them. It was hideous! And in front of children! Good money though."

He also did a ton of industrial shows. "I was a dancing tampon for a Kimberly Clark convention," he recalls wistfully. "The costume itself was ... beautiful."

Then, one fateful night, a fairy godmother entered his life, and, as in all Cinderella stories, things would never be the same again.

"Meeting Liza really did change my life," he says. "I'd just moved here, Billy had just moved here, we all came up from Texas around the same time, in 1990. I'd been working in clubs with a trio for ten years – a group called Wiseguys – and we had opened for Joan Rivers and different stars, and worked up here a lot."

"It was the same with Billy. He was playing a piano bar in Midtown called



Clockwise from above: With his fairy godmother, Liza Minnelli; on stage with Billy Stritch; and with Martin Short.

"I was a dancing tampon for a Kimberly Clark convention. The costume itself was ... beautiful."

Bobo's and Chita was there with Liza. Chita knew Billy. They were eating and Liza kept looking up and saying: 'That guy is great!' then they'd go back to eating. She'd look up: 'What a chord, that's the most gorgeous chord ...' So she finally just got up and sat next to Billy and she was watching him and he was like: 'Um ... hello?'

"They started talking and she said, 'Do you know *Teach Me Tonight*?' He did *Teach Me Tonight*, and she said, you know, I'm putting that into my Radio City show – do you arrange for other people? And he was saying: 'Yes, I can do that!'

"Can you come to our rehearsal tomorrow?' 'Yeah, I can do that!'

"She came to his club act, he stationed me right next to her, and we started talking, and we've been talking for twentysome years. We just all liked each other. She's definitely part of our family, and we're part of hers. Six years ago we did *Liza's at the Palace* [at the Palace Theatre on



Broadway]. I was singing and dancing on stage with her, and it won a Tony. So, yeah, she's been a huge fairy godmother for us and so many other people."

It's real dream come true stuff. "It's pathetic," he says. "I asked my mother for an agent at six. So many people I know have the same story. You just know you're not like everybody else. You're not going to sell shoes, there has to be more. I wasn't really the best singer or the best actor or certainly the best dancer, but I knew I had to hang out with showbusiness people. I love the energy. They're funny, they're smart, they're beautiful – what's not to like? So it's funny that I find myself in a position of promoting those people now, and hanging with them, people much more successful ..."

He trails off. Does he still have a hint of a dream? The name in lights? The hit Broadway lead?

"I feel that I'm too realistic to think that's going to happen," he says, "but I do think Project Cast Party is something that could be the star. I know it's entertaining – we entertain hundreds of people every week, from all over the world, young, old, every possible kind of person that could walk through the door. I know that could be successful."

"But am I going to be Beyoncé?" He laughs at the prospect. "Probably not. I don't think so."

www.castpartynyc.com

Quick fire round

What's your pet peeve?

"People who have no spacial reference to other people. Just yesterday I was at Starbucks and this girl was like leaning on me. There was something so annoying about that. And, of course, living in New York is not the best place for that issue. "And bad breath."

What can't you live without?

"My friends."

Guilty pleasure?

"The Osmonds. Any Osmond. The most random Osmond. They reopened in Vegas recently. They look like they're 25 years old."

Happy song?

"Anything by Cher. This is really telling, these answers are making me sound like truly the whitest person in the world. I actually have great musical taste. I love a Gershwin, I love a Porter."

Love of my life

"New York City."

Cats or dogs?

"Dogs."

Mornings or evenings?

"Evenings."

Gershwin or Gaga?

"Oh, that's very hard, but it's obvious that I love Gershwin. But I love her too. Gaga singing Gershwin, there you go. Does that get me out of it?"

