



Days of Yore: Sahara snatches up 'The Rat Pack Is Back' tribute:

By Carol Cling, Las Vegas Review-Journal

Once upon a time, in the magical realm of Las Vegas, four princes -- well, actually, one Chairman of the Board, two princes and a court jester -- reigned supreme, dispensing song, dance and laughter.

Their names were Frank, Dino, Sammy and Joey, a regal quartet that held court in what was known as the Copa Room.

All but one is gone now -- and so is their fabled Sands showroom.

But the spirit that transformed those vintage Vegas days has returned to the Las Vegas Strip with "The Rat Pack Is Back," a show devoted to their legendary high jinks that's now at the Sahara.

Last year, "The Rat Pack Is Back" drew enthusiastic audiences to the Desert Inn's cozy Starlight Lounge for a sentimental journey back to Dec. 12, 1961, when Frank Sinatra's 46th birthday inspired his Rat Pack pals (minus Peter Lawford) to gather for a fictional one-night stand.

But ongoing legal battles with the estates of Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jr. -- three of the headliners the show salutes -- led to an early December shutdown.

That in turn prompted a promise from co-producer David Cassidy: "The Rat Pack Is Back" would be back.

And the Sahara's Congo Room provides an appropriately retro setting for the show.

"That's one of the reasons we chose the Sahara," says singer Bobby Caldwell, who reprises his "Rat Pack" Sinatra role.

"We're not only embodying the performances of these legends, we're recapturing the ambiance of the era," he says.

Which is just as it should be, according to Yale Rowe, the Sahara's marketing and entertainment director.

After all, the Sahara is one "a handful" of Strip resorts "the show really fits in," he says. As one of the few casinos "that was around during those days," the new venue offers "a real flavor of what Las Vegas was all about."

Sahara officials first saw "The Rat Pack Is Back" during its Desert Inn run "and we felt it had the ability to be perfect in a bigger room," Rowe says. "Once the (Desert Inn) run ended and it didn't have a home, we felt it was a perfect fit for our history at the Sahara."

Negotiations with Cassidy and co-producer Don Reo took "about a month," Rowe says, adding that the Sahara does not anticipate the same kind of legal problems that previously plagued the show.

And while the "Rat Pack's" new home is bigger -- the Congo Room seats about 550, compared to Desert Inn's 300-seat Starlight Lounge -- the changes are relatively minor, Rowe says.

For one thing, all four cast members are veterans of the first "Rat Pack Is Back" production. In addition to Caldwell, Tony Tillman (alias Sammy) and Hiram Kaster (as Joey, the Rat Pack's lone real-life survivor) all opened in the Desert Inn version. And local lounge veteran Rick Michel, who played Dino during the previous run, also repeats his role at the Sahara.

"We have a camaraderie that formed from the show's inception," Caldwell says, citing Kaster as a key to the production's success.

"For my money, he's probably the most important cast member," Caldwell says. "He sets the timbre of the show. It's really up to Hiram to get the people into the mood."

Also augmenting the period feel: Lon Bronson's 14-piece band, which provides appropriately swingin' musical backing for Rat Pack classics from Frank's "I Get a Kick Out of You" and Dino's "That's Amore" to Sammy's "Who Can I Turn To."

Although "The Rat Pack Is Back" itself hasn't changed significantly in form or content, the Congo Room has undergone some alterations to accommodate its new retro tenant.

"It's a different room, a larger room," Caldwell says, which means he and his fellow Rat Packers have "a lot more stage to work with. I think it makes it a little bit larger than life."

Despite the changes, Sahara officials "tried to keep that period look," installing stationary lights instead of contemporary movable lighting," Rowe says. And the performers "use mikes with wires, which you never see anymore."

Black-and-white photographs from the era adorning the walls and costumed cocktail servers also "take you back to the golden era" the show depicts, Rowe says.

But there's one significant difference between the current Congo Room and the showrooms of the Rat Pack era: theater-style seating that's "more comfortable" for contemporary audiences, he says. (A VIP-style "Golden Circle" will feature cocktail tables and a more vintage atmosphere, Rowe says, along with a price \$10 higher than the standard \$34.95 ticket.)

And although another contemporary standard has worked its way into the Congo Room -- no smoking in the audience -- the same does not hold true for the performers, Caldwell says.

"We're allowed to smoke," he says. "It's a prop that's genetically impossible to avoid."

Just like the ever-present drinks, the ring-a-ding humor, the devil-may-care attitude that characterized the Rat Pack, Caldwell says.

Re-creating such legendary performers represents a challenge, he says, "but it's a fun challenge. We're all aficionados of that era."

During that era, the Rat Pack's spontaneous song-and-dance style symbolized Vegas entertainment.

These days, however, "it's a lost art," Caldwell says, contrasting "The Rat Pack Is Back's" relative simplicity to the high-tech spectacles, crammed with elaborate special effects, that dominate today's Strip.

As a result, "The Rat Pack Is Back" stands out once again, offering audiences the chance to return to that magical Vegas of once-upon-a-time.

