

WHAT A WONDERFUL WORLD
When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie that's....

by Simon Dumenco
Associate editor of Special Report

Dondino! Here he is, in his hotel room between shows at the Four Queens Casino, looking quite dapper in a custom-tailored tux that's snug in all the right places. Hair of curls and lips like cherries. Coppertone tan so flawless, so deep, it seems that it must penetrate all the way through to his internal organs. A voice, honestly, like warm honey.

Donna! Here she is, seated next to Dondino, looking quite smashing in a vivid yellow and black outfit with a most flattering cut. Movie-star cheekbones and hair cut in the funkiest Cleopatra bob. She has the bearing and style of a star, but she's not. Dondino's the star, and Donna is Dondino's manager/business partner, and for the moment, Donna and Dondino are explaining, tag-team style, Dondino's appeal to his thousands and thousands of fans. "I don't try to blow people out of the room," he says. "Other places in Vegas you have a girl in a tube top and stretch pants on stage and 50-year-old people in the audience holding their ears," Donna says.

"Do you know where I get my show?" Dondino asks, "I listen to Muzak. It's Muzak. People accept it. It's crazy." "His show builds you up," Donna says, "It doesn't wear you down."

"People tell me, 'You made me feel young and romantic again; happy,'" Dondino says. "He just has that natural charisma," Donna says.

A long story made short: Dondino was born in Italy; was raised in Brooklyn; first started singing at age 13; performed in nightclubs worldwide, always as a tuxedo singer, a class act; then gave it all up ("I got tired of traveling all over the world performing"), settled in Iowa, and opened a country club and golf course.

Then Vegas happened. "I got this brainstorm: Well, let me go to Las Vegas, and if I can get hooked up there, I won't have to travel anymore because people all over the world travel to Las Vegas," Dondino says. "Believe it or not, it worked."

Then Dondino hooked up with the Four Queens and began playing matinees six days a week for over twelve years. "I get letters from fans in Germany," Dondino says. "It blows my mind." "People just love him," Donna says. "I'm very fortunate," Dondino says. "Very fortunate."

Okay, forget all the talk. What we have here now is a showroom full of tourist who have neatly folded themselves into the red-velvet chairs around the little round tables. Everybody's sipping the first half of the two drink minimum. They have the look,

collectively, of people who have spent the day hemorrhaging money in quarters at the slots. They want to, shall we say, regroup? They have come here to do that.

Ladies and gentlemen....DONDINO!

They eat him up.

Donna's right. They love Dondino. They adore him. This is it. This is the real thing. This is show business. To their unflagging delight. Dondino flawlessly lavishes on them the soundtrack of their lives. "Hit the Road, Jack." "Please Release Me." "I Did It My Way." And then near the end, it gets even better; it gets divine. He comes to his show-stopper. "What a Wonderful World."

His shimmery lapels are coruscating in a wash of blue and red spotlights as his hips trace a near-imperceptible figure eight. He's pouring that voice of his into this heart-breakingest paean to life, sweet life, and his fingers are doing that thing again-the third and fourth fingers on his right hand are twitching rhythmically, spasmodically, in an arresting display of controlled ecstasy.

I see skies of blue.....It happens whenever he reaches for a high note or for an emotion in just about any slow song. And clouds of white....He doesn't lose himself on the outside (this is a class act, remember).

The bright, blessed day....But one senses that with songs like this, he loses himself-utterly and completely dissolves-on the inside. The dark, scared night....His should and his heart are all aflutter, but his emotion first filters through his utter sense of professionalism before it shows up on the outside of his body as just two fingers twitching on a hand that is magically, gracefully cutting an arc through the thick showroom air.

And I think to myself.....The man, for gosh sakes, is poetry. Poetry of motion and grace and grooming and tailoring.

.....what a wonderful world.

Dondino now looks as though he needs to smoke a cigarette. (Too bad he doesn't smoke.) He pauses, takes a deep breath, then squints down at the audience and spots one of his many fans. "Are you crying?" Dondino asks. She is. A lady at the corner table is clutching her husband's hand for dear life, beaming with emotion for her sweetie, for this wonderful world, and, yes, for Dondino.

"She's crying," says Dondino. "Thank you. That's great. You're beautiful."