

NEW YORK where



Diamonds Are Forever□

At 84, actress/singer/raconteur/doctor (!) Carol Channing still sparkles. Currently traveling the nation with her one-woman show, the legend makes her first New York club appearance in over 25 years this month *By Bill Corsello*

Carol Channing is a trouper. She is famous for originating the role of Dolly Levi in *Hello, Dolly!*, of course, but she is even more famous for playing the musical-comedy matchmaker in over 5,000 performances—on Broadway, in London, in tours and in revivals—and never missing one. It should come as no surprise then that she is, at 84, not only still working, but still working hard—and having the time of her life touring with a show about her life, a show that has its roots right here in New York City.



THE EVER-YOUTHFUL CAROL CHANNING.

Two years ago, Channing participated in *Singular Sensations*, an Off-Broadway series in which stage stars sang songs and answered questions about their lives and careers, a musical *Inside the Actor's Studio*, if you will. Channing brought down the house, not only with numbers like “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend” and “Before the Parade Passes By,” but with hilarious stories from her life. She has developed that event into her own one-woman show, *The First 80 Years Are the Hardest: The Carol Channing Experience*, with which she has been touring the nation. It is a cabaret-friendly version of this show that she brings to supper club Feinstein’s at the Regency this month, her first New York club engagement in over 25 years. Gone is the interviewer, but what remains are her classic showstoppers, wacky stories with cameo appearances from everyone from Queen Elizabeth to Ethel Merman to Richard Nixon, and a heartstring-tugging finale in which she brings her husband onstage for a little soft-shoe action. And if they look at each other with the infatuation and adoration of newlyweds, that’s because they practically are.

Just 27 short months ago, Channing was married to Harry Kulljian, her junior-high-school sweetheart. Upon reconnecting after a 70-year separation, the pair of widows wed. When not touring, Channing lives with her husband in his idyllic Modesto, California, home. I caught up with her there late in the summer and found out that the woman who first captured Broadway’s heart nearly 56 years ago when she originated the role of Lorelei Lee in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* still brims with excitement—and knows how to charm.

How are things in Modesto?•It’s just beautiful right now. We have a garden that you wouldn’t believe. Italian cypress is growing up to heaven and there’s a rose garden and white figs and black figs and apricots and peaches and lemons and oranges. It was an orchard originally. We just say, “What’ll we have for breakfast?” and we go out and see what looks good on the tree.

You haven't done a club act in a very long time, correct?•No, I haven't, but it's great experience if your primary work is the theatre. I don't scoff at it. It teaches you how to handle an audience. Nothing frightens you after a bunch of drunks at the late show. They can take a gun and shoot me; doesn't frighten me.

I saw your original appearance in *Singular Sensations* and was struck by what a great storyteller you are.•I never knew I was. I never tried it. This is the first time I've told people about all the wonderful people I have met.

How has the tour been going?•We just finished Medford, Oregon, in the Craterion Ginger Rogers Theatre. Ginger had a ranch only a few blocks from there, so they named it after her. I told the audience all about making a movie with Ginger Rogers, *The First Traveling Saleslady*. The script was so awful that we called it *Death of a Saleslady*. And I can't get rid of this movie. Every place I'm performing, they dig it up and play it across the street. Poor Clint Eastwood, it was his first movie. He wasn't the leading man, he was just my boyfriend in it, and I wasn't the leading lady ... Ginger saw to that. They were reopening RKO studios. We closed it within a week. Two little girls closed RKO, and it rocked Wall Street—you wouldn't think we were that powerful. Ginger, wherever she is now, I'm sure they're playing *Death of a Saleslady*. Before Medford, we were in Austin, Texas. Oh, I had a wonderful time in Austin! The governor came, he invited us to come in for breakfast, and then we went over to a legislature meeting. The speaker of the house introduced me, and they gave me every award you can get in Austin. Oh, they're darling there.

It sounds like you are having a ball doing this show.•You know, the truth is I am, and it's the first time in my life that I am really having fun. It's gratifying, because I really suffered over all my other shows, trying to get them right. But you see, I never had a show in my own words, until now.

How did it come about?•Harry decided let's have some fun and go and play Rancho Mirage, where I have a little condo. They invited me to the McCallum Theatre, where I am a trustee. I sit right next to President Ford [at board meetings]. He is brilliant; he knows what a gross is and what a net is, all of that, and he keeps explaining to me. The trustees figure out the finances. Well, that's not my racket. But they have me as a trustee, because I love the McCallum Theatre. Every actor loves the McCallum Theatre. Oh, and did you know that I've been made a doctor?

By whom?•California State University, Stanislaus. And it was a unanimous vote and a standing ovation, they tell me. I'm an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts. And as I told them, I make house calls. I am just thrilled to pieces, and because of this, I'm starting a foundation and—oh, we're not ready to announce it. Oh, dear, I told the gardener all about it. Anyway, I can't tell you the details yet. You see, the chancellor calls me all the time and he says that I—never mind, I can't tell you.

When were you made a doctor?•Just a few months ago. Imagine 12,000 students yelling "Hello, Carol!" It was so thrilling.

You're still performing and you're starting a foundation. What's your secret?•You see, I can't remember how old I am, and most people my age, 84, they can't remember, either.

You mean that you don't think about how old you are?•Never! I know you're supposed to act tired or something.

So, you must be excited to return to New York.•I'm very excited, especially to be at the Regency Hotel. I used to stay there when I was doing *Hello, Dolly!* They're giving us a suite with an extra room. Do you live in New York City?

I do.•Well, then you're all right. I was going to invite you to stay with us.

Can I stay with you anyway?