



The Republican.

Christmas show ends its 30-year run

Thursday, November 29, 2007

By KEITH J. O'CONNOR

Say it isn't so.

When the last notes sound from the MassMutual Center tomorrow night, the Dan Kane Singers will end its 30-year tradition of ringing in the holidays with a lavish show.

"It's true," said Dan Kane.

And the group's Web site says it all, where the following posting greeted Web site visitors looking for information on this year's show:

Cover story "It is with heavy hearts that we announce our last Christmas Spectacular. Mark your calendars now to make sure you don't miss out on the biggest and brightest Christmas show in Western Massachusetts."

And, if you haven't purchased those tickets yet, be prepared for a surprise as their last show is nearly sold out.

But that's really no surprise. Most of their Christmas Spectaculars have been sellouts, whether filling a smaller 150-seat venue in the early days or their last few mega-concerts at the Mass Mutual Center for some 5,000 fans.

So why are the Dan Kane Singers ending the Christmas Spectacular when their audiences are still faithful?

"Well, first of all, it's not the end of the Dan Kane Singers, we are just giving up our longtime Christmas tradition. And, I'm not sick, none of us are sick," Kane, 47, said about the concerns voiced by many fans.

"It's bittersweet and disappointing that a wonderful time has come and gone for us ... but it's really about wanting to leave with class and style while still at the top of our game," he added.

Kane's history with the Dan Kane Singers began at the ripe old age of 16 in 1977 when he took over the group that was Jack Hague's Town House Singers.

"Jack was the musical director, the piano player, the weekend guy at Gleason's Town House in Holyoke, who started this whole idea by collecting folks like my father, Jim Kane, and Jim O'Leary, who liked to sing and who on weekends downstairs in the restaurant would get up and belt out a few tunes," said Kane, who lives in Westfield.

"There were about 16 really terrific local people at the time in the group, and one day they had the idea that instead of singing for free, moving upstairs at the Town House and charging a few dollars for a Christmas show then giving the money away to charities, which we still do, such as our first benefactors Sunshine Village," he added about the early origins of what would grow into their Christmas Spectacular.

The group's new musical director began putting his own young friends into the adult group, creating a new audience for them, increasing the number of singers, and building up their fan base.

Today, the Dan Kane Singers consider themselves a family of more than 145 members ranging in age from 6 to 80. They come from all walks of life such as teachers, nurses, office workers, a librarian, a psychologist, carpenters and others.

And build up a fan base he did. The group's Christmas Spectacular began to draw more and more people, so many that they outgrew the Town House and had to move to the Opera House at the Yankee Pedlar in Holyoke, where one night of singing turned into two, and they packed in about 400 people.

"We soon outgrew the Opera House, moved to the Log Cabin outgrew them, kicking off the whole concept of bringing the show to Cathedral High School where we could accommodate 1,500 people," Kane said about the show which was growing into a true "spectacular."

Already outgrowing the high school's auditorium, Kane was approached by the late Peter Picknelly about what would soon become a dream come true for the singers - moving their Christmas Spectacular to Symphony Hall in Springfield where they would grow to over 2,500 seats.

"Peter told me he wanted to bring more people downtown, and he would cover our costs if we didn't sell out, which makes a non-profit group like ours sleep easier at night," Kane said. That was back in 1998, and they had little trouble filling their new home, where they stayed until 2002.

"But we were unable to grow further at Symphony Hall," Kane said.

So, with the new MassMutual Center scheduled to open soon, the group took a big risk and in 2003 helped to open the newly named civic center with their Christmas Spectacular, where they have been playing to crowds of 5,000 Christmas music lovers ever since.

Despite the fact they moved on to mega-concerts at the MassMutual Center, Kane said there is not much new and different with their show, other than the large screens which provide close up shots of the group, videos, and lyrics for the audience to sing along. "They really like that," Kane said about having the lyrics in front of them.

"What appeals to our audience is an old-fashioned Andy Williams-style variety show and we give them that from our opening number 'It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas' to our finale 'We Need a Little Christmas' from the Broadway musical 'Mame,'" said Kane, noting they are accompanied by an eight-piece band.

The group's musical director said they will be performing everything from the most popular Christmas carols such as "Silent Night," "Silver Bells," "Little Drummer Boy," and "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" to more popular tunes of the holiday season such as "Mary's Little Boy Child," "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year," "Holly Jolly Christmas," and "My Grown Up Christmas List," as well as more recent songs such as "Believe" from "The Polar Express" movie and Barry Manilow's "Because It's Christmas."

This year's Christmas Spectacular will consist of many longtime members such as Kane's father Jim, 77, who will sing "I'll Be Home for Christmas," and Jim Guzzo, who will solo on "Blue Christmas," alongside the Dan Kane Junior Singers.

Among the many young soloists featured at the show will be 17-year-old Meghann Fahy from Longmeadow, who will perform "A Cradle in Bethlehem," originally done by Nat King Cole and more recently by Vince Gill; Noah Lis, 16, from Palmer performing the traditional Christmas song "Joy to the World" mixed with the pop song of the same name by the rock group Three Dog Night; Traci Mnich, 18, from Suffield, Conn., singing "Mary's Little Boy Child;" and nine-year-old Madeline Lukomski of Easthampton singing Karen Carpenter's version of "Winter Wonderland" arranged by her brother Richard Carpenter.

Also, Kane's most famous Junior Singer, country artist Ashley Gearing, who recently signed with Curb Records, will return to perform "Where Are You Christmas," sung by Faith Hill in the popular movie, "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas."

Kane said he is excited that U.S. Rep. Richard E. Neal will be saying a few words live to the audience tomorrow night.

"He is a former teacher of mine at Cathedral High School who is friendly with my dad, and it's a wonderful tie in to our old Cathedral days," said Kane, who is a special needs teacher at Papermill Elementary School in Westfield.

As for his thoughts on their last Christmas Spectacular, Kane's thoughts turned to his father and the man who started it all.

"I think this last show will be wonderful for my dad and Jack, seeing something they created some 30 years ago come full circle from the small Gleason Town House to our mega-event at the MassMutual Center, which is the biggest local ticketed Christmas event of anything around ... and that's pretty amazing for a volunteer group of singers," Kane said.

And, if you don't get a chance to see the Dan Kane Singers final Christmas Spectacular at the MassMutual Center, Kane, along with an abbreviated group of singers will be performing Christmas tunes at the Munich Haus Restaurant in Chicopee and at the Holyoke Mall at Ingleside during December.

For more information, visit www.dankanesingers.org

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