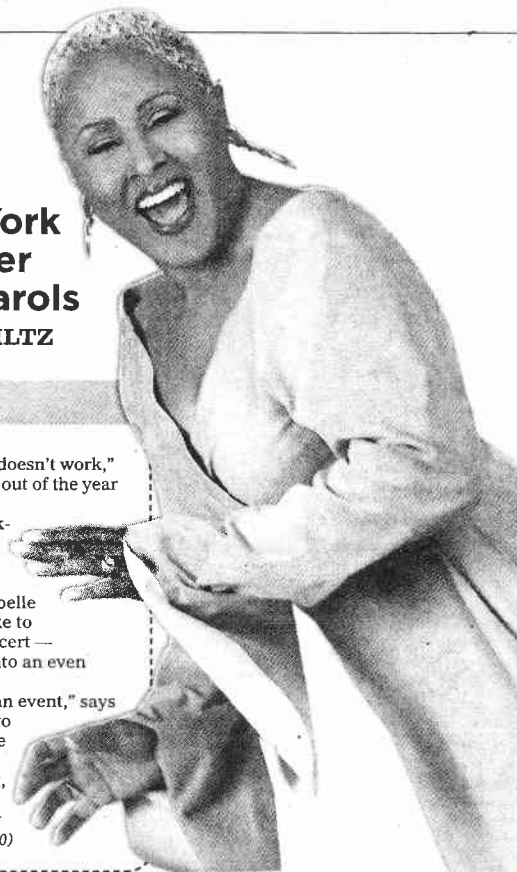


Rockin' around the holidays

Cool New York shows offer more than carols
BY MICHAEL GILTZ



► Darlene Love is all you need at Christmastime

It doesn't seem possible. Legendary singer Darlene Love has been at the heart of Christmas music for decades. She was a key voice on the very first rock 'n' roll holiday album: Phil Spector's 1963 classic, "A Christmas Gift for You." And she's popped up during the holidays ever since, on the radio and on movie soundtracks, plus her annual concerts in New York and appearances on "Late Show With David Letterman," where she reliably shows up this time of year to sing her classic "Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)." Her concert this year is Dec. 17 at Lincoln Center.

Yet her new CD, "It's Christmas, Of Course!," is billed as Love's very first solo Christmas album.

"She never put out a Christmas CD?" Most people when they hear that probably won't believe it!" laughs Love about

the album. "But I wasn't the only one on that Spector album." (It also contained, of course, the Ronettes, the Crystals and Bob B. Soxx and the Blue Jeans.)

"I've never actually put out an official Darlene Love Christmas CD," says Love, whose new album tackles contemporary holiday gems by the likes of Tom Petty, the Pretenders, XTC and others, all of which sound like classics as soon as she sings them.

Well, it's about time, since Ms. Love owns the holiday.

"I think I do. They call me the Christmas Queen," she says. "Everybody is [the royalty] of something. Aretha is the Queen of Soul. Elvis was the King of Rock 'n' Roll — and I'm the Queen of Christmas."

Does that mean she could just work two months out of the year and coast on

all that holiday joy?

"I've tried that, and it doesn't work," says Love. "Two months out of the year doesn't do it."

Right now, she's working nonstop thanks to her current stint on Broadway, where she plays Motormouth Maybelle in "Hairspray." She'd like to turn her Christmas concert — a 17-year tradition — into an even bigger extravaganza.

"We want to make it an event," says Love. "We want people to come to New York to see it. We're working up to that, but like everything, it takes time." ♦

(Dec. 17, Rose Theater at Lincoln Center, 212-721-6500)

▼ Aimee Mann spikes the season with wry

Is two years a tradition? Aimee Mann certainly hopes so. Exhausted from her previous album, Mann delivered a Christmas CD last year ("One More Drifter in the Snow") and embarked on a short tour with an engaging, oddball variety-show mix of music, comedy and special guests.

It worked, and this year she's doing 15 shows (almost double that of last year). Mann says she's planning to make the holiday jaunt an annual tradition. She'll perform this Wednesday at Manhattan Center.

"It was really, really fun," Mann says of last year's show. This year's rotating guests will include Joe Henry, Grant-Lee Phillips, Josh Ritter, Ben Lee, Chuck Prophet, quirky cutie Nellie McKay and comic Paul F. Tompkins, who emcees in New York and who Mann says inspired the whole shebang. (Hopefully, Philips will tag along for the show here; in 2006, his narra-

tion of Dr. Seuss' book "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" as Mann wryly sang "You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch"

made even the smallest baby boomer hearts glad.)

"This year we may tilt a little more toward music, and I won't insist everyone play Christmas songs," says Mann. "We might include some film or video."

Mann has a CD coming out in early 2008, but says this tour is something to look forward to as the year comes to a close.

"It's more fun [than a regular tour] but it's also more stressful, because we really don't know what's going to happen," says the 47-year-old singer, who's married to musician Michael Penn. "It's nice doing a Christmas show because it really gets you in the holiday mood. ... In Boston [where her career started], I used to play Santa Claus for everybody and have everyone who didn't have anywhere to go come to my house."

"This show is trying to get you back to when Christmas was fun. And for most people, the last purely happy memory of Christmas was probably when they were 8 years old."

But just because she's touring with a Christmas show, don't assume Mann is holiday crazy.

"All my Christmas spirit comes from onstage," says the singer-songwriter, who won Academy Award nominations for her songs for the movie "Magnolia." "Seriously, I'm not going to have time to buy Christmas presents." ♦

(Wednesday, Manhattan Center Grand Ballroom, 212-307-7171)

...And ring a bell for these holiday shows:

Michael Feinstein, Feinstein's at Loews Regency, through Dec. 29 • Craig S. Harris' "God's Trombones," Apollo Theater, Dec. 13-16 • Ronnie Spector's Christmas Show, B.B. King's, Dec. 15 & 16 • New Tang Dynasty's "Holiday Wonders," Beacon Theater, Dec. 18-26 • Christmas Celtic Sojourn with Brian O'Donovan, Town Hall, Dec. 19-20 • Handel's Messiah, Lincoln Center, Dec. 19-22 • Kwanzaa Celebration, Apollo Theater, Dec. 28.



▲ Better not frown — Kiki & Herb are comin' to town

Nothing goes together like Kiki and Herb and Christmas. "Somehow, when we do these Christmas shows," says performer Justin Bond, "it manages to focus what the thrust of what Kiki and Herb are all about."

Created by Bond and Kenny Melman in the early '90s, Kiki and Herb are a cynically sentimental, rather inebriated duo that does wickedly funny covers of everything from Broadway tunes to Britney Spears to Nirvana. They're at Carnegie Hall Wednesday in a new show, "The Second Coming."

It'll surely be another dizzying musical journey laced with monologues that mix autobiographical tales of how the two characters met in an institution in the 1930s and have blazed through the entertainment industry ever since.

"There's something about the holidays that lends a power to the shows that is different from what we do during the rest of the year," says Melman. "There's always been a touch of sweetness to it." Tony-nominated for their recent Broadway run, the New York denizens' first CD, 2000's "Do You Hear What We Hear," was a Christmas album whose selections ranged from "Frosty the Snowman" to the "M*A*S*H" theme, Johnny Mandel's "Suicide Is Painless."

"Most people don't begin with a Christmas album," says Melman. "We just thought we'd cut to the chase."

"The first performance I ever did," adds Bond, "was when I was 18 months old and I did a little speech at a Christmas pageant. That was my first appearance on stage. So maybe it's some sort of primal performance thing." ♦ (Dec. 12, Carnegie Hall, 212-247-7800)

