

**W**hat must it be like to look and sound as much like another person as Jay White does Neil Diamond?

White has made a good living out of the illusion, enhancing what nature provided in resemblance with a portrayal of Diamond that is eerily precise, right down to his grimacing facial expressions that accompany the chorus of "I Am...I Said".

But if he's thankful for anything, other than Diamond's own career longevity, it's that long before White first crooned "Sweet Caroline" on stage, he was already a fan. "If I looked like Bob Dylan and had to sing like him, it wouldn't have worked," White says. "But with Neil Diamond I just happened to be a fan first. I fell in love with the music."

He portrays Diamond five nights a week at the Riviera's Le Bistro Theatre, which is rapidly becoming the best little showroom in Vegas with such performers in residence as White, singer Marlene Ricci, impressionist Stephen Sorrentino and comic-hypnotist Dr. Scott. When the curtain rises, and he emerges center-stage through a dry-ice fog to the opening strains of "Love on the Rocks", you'll be forgiven for thinking that Jay was sick that night, and Neil stepped in to do a friend a favor.

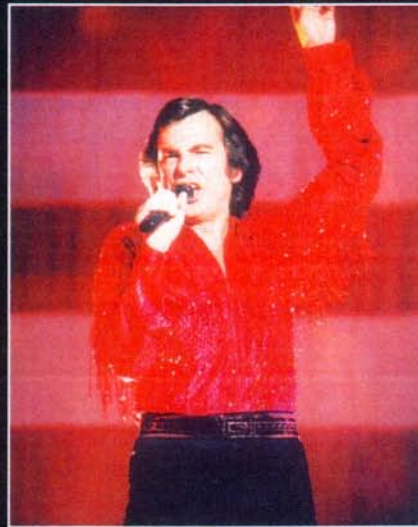
The show covers all the classics - "Cherry Cherry", "Solitary Man", "Song Sung Blue", "September Morn" and a few surprises like "I'm a Believer", recently revived in *Shrek* and originally written by Diamond for the Monkees. Along the way, White tries to involve the audience with singalongs, though most fans are already singing from the very first note of White's show.

So precise is White's portrayal that some audience members swear they're seeing the real thing. He's had fans rush the stage. During his nine-year run with *Legends in Concert*, one woman came backstage and asked why Neil Diamond was performing with all those impressionists.

"When I first started, the two things that seemed most important were the voice and the look, so I worked really hard on those, but as the years went on I realized there was a whole lot more to it," White said. "It was his

body language, the way he walks across a stage, the way he talks to an audience in between songs that make the whole package more believable."

And the shirts - let's not forget the sparkly shirts. "I understand he gets charged quite a bit for those," says White, laughing. "They're solid glass beads, and it takes about six months to make one shirt. I have two that I made while I was with *Legends In Concert*. I had to be there from 7 pm until midnight, but I only worked two 12-minute slots, so I had a lot of free time in the dressing room. While the other



performers would read, watch TV and play video games, I was putting beads on shirts."

White debuted with *Legends* in 1989, when he became the first "living" Legend on the bill. "It was nice to be part of a group and part of a big show on the Strip, but after awhile I didn't feel like I was growing as a performer or learning anything new," White recalls.

"I had to do 'Sweet Caroline', I had to do 'America', 'Forever in Blue Jeans' became a fun signature tune with the audience, so I had to do that, so there was very little room to make any changes. I really wanted to go out and perform a full Neil Diamond show because he's got so many songs to choose from."

Looking at Jay White today, and listening to him perform, it would be hard to imagine he'd be better suited for any other career, but his original plan was to be a goalie in the

National Hockey League. "In my early 20s I got as far as the IHL, and played in a few games before I got cut." He also started singing around that time, and found it was a lot safer than dodging slap shots.

"Being an impersonator happened by accident; I was a lead singer in a top 40 band and people would say 'you sound a lot like Neil Diamond'. So I thought, 'I wonder if I shaved off my mustache, and styled the hair a little longer...' and sure enough there was a resemblance."

By doing so, he ostensibly put an end to his own singing career but White says he has no regrets. "When I started doing this I thought it was going to last about two years. I'd make a little extra money part time, and then it would fizzle out. And now I'm starting my 20th year."

After viewing tapes of his show, Neil Diamond himself singled out White as his favorite among his impersonators, though the two have only met once, backstage at the MGM Grand. "We only had about five minutes because it was right before his concert," White recalled. "He was very complimentary and told me that he had heard wonderful things about me from his mom, son, and band. He and I had a picture taken together and he signed it, 'Only Memorex can tell.'"

Thus far, two decades in the Diamond business haven't spawned an identity crisis - "When I step off stage I go back to being Jay White and I'm very content with that" - nor does White believe he's taken this unique talent as far as it can go.

"I'd like to do a Broadway-style musical, where I would perform as him throughout his 25 year career. There's such a good catalog of songs there, I think I could do something like that." Given the success of the ABBA musical *Mamma Mia* and with musicals based on the songs of Stevie Wonder and Queen already in the works, the idea would appear to be a natural. But whether he's performing in New York or Las Vegas, Jay White plans to enjoy the ride. "I really love what I do, and could keep doing this for another 10 or 15 years and still be happy." ::