

JAZZ FRANK D'RONE

Singer hits a high note late in his career

BY HOWARD REICH
Tribune critic

As his old friend Frank Sinatra might have put it, it was a very good year for Chicago singer Frank D'Rone.

In April, D'Rone turned 80, and in June he overcame a series of health challenges to play a triumphant comeback engagement at the Jazz Showcase. D'Rone sang better than he had in years, his tone warm, his pitch unerring, his sense of rhythm and phrase remarkably relaxed. And then there was his guitar work, as sleekly alluring as ever.

About the same time, D'Rone celebrated the release of what's probably the best recording of a long career, "Double Exposure." The aptly named album showed D'Rone's mastery in two realms: swinging robustly in front of a roaring big band and singing intimately with the sole accompaniment of his jazz guitar.

By the end of the summer, D'Rone was marking his 80th at the Chicago Jazz Festival, albeit at the ignominious Jazz on Jackson stage, where much of the audience had to sit on

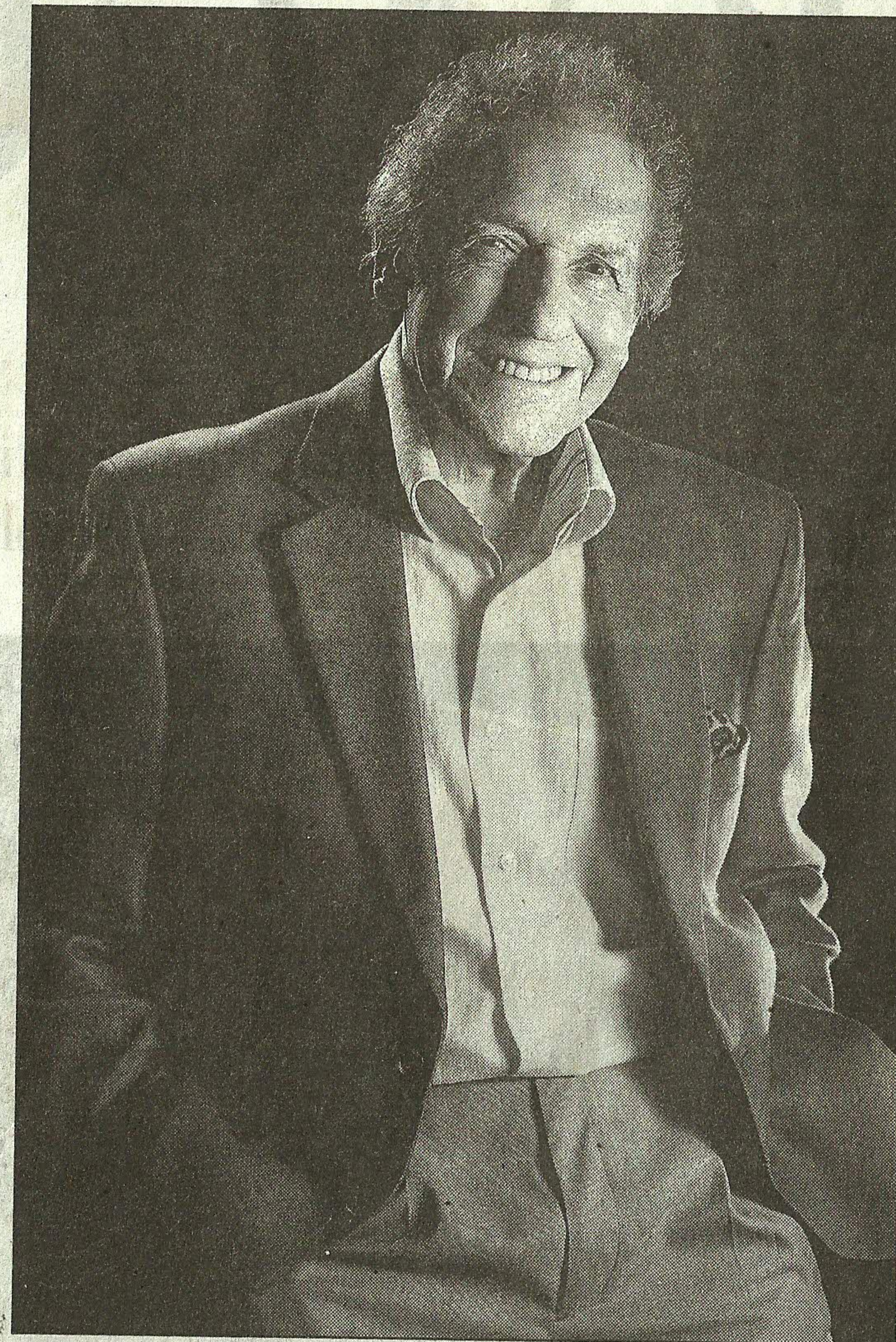
the filthy street to hear him. Despite the inappropriate setting — why wasn't D'Rone featured on the festival's main stage? — the man turned in a sublimely controlled, irrepressibly inventive set.

He also lured crowds to stages across the city, from the Green Mill in Uptown to Chambers in Niles to uncounted private parties, and a list of invitations awaits him for 2013.

"Thank God, it's been a great year," concedes D'Rone, who's not one to applaud himself publicly.

"The turnout has been great — I've been drawing!" adds the singer, as if surprised by his enduring appeal. "And not just people my age. I see some 25-, 30-year-olds in there, a lot of them, who seem to dig what I've been doing."

D'Rone's parlance may be right out of the jazz-hipster '50s, but his music remains as current — or perhaps we should say as timeless — as anything being sung in jazz today. For no one dispatches jazz standards quite like D'Rone: The way he embellishes a line, stretches a phrase and accompanies himself on



Jazz singer and guitarist Frank D'Rone marked his 80th birthday this year with an inventive set at the Chicago Jazz Festival.

guitar reflects a lifetime of developing a singular art.

Every jazz musician aspires to this level of individuality, but D'Rone achieves it virtually every time he steps in

front of a microphone, a feat that has no easy explanation. He's the first to acknowledge that he never practices singing or playing the guitar, unless he's studying a new piece of

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music. Otherwise, he does his experimenting onstage in front of an audience, when the stakes are highest. Perhaps that's why his work always sounds fresh.

Of all D'Rone has accomplished this year, he holds the "Double Exposure" recording as key.

"We did the whole thing in three days," says D'Rone, referring to his collaboration with bandleader-arranger Phil Kelly.

Why feature both big-band and solo tracks?

"It was kind of my idea," D'Rone says. "I've had a lot of people say, 'You should do a CD of just you and guitar.' And I thought a whole CD of me and guitar would be a little boring, so I thought: half and half. ... I thought (Kelly's) charts would add to it all."

Indeed they did, though it's a fair bet no one would have complained about an album featuring nothing but D'Rone's supple voice and his evocative guitar playing.

Maybe next time around?

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