

# Jilly Nights at One Cool Club

## FROM COVER

"The waiters," he says, "could make \$2,000 a week and Howie did well enough to buy an apartment building." Joey Rizzo flips through memories of those days like pages in a photo album.

"We had a beef with [Mayor John] Lindsay because of the parking. His brother owned a gay bar up the block. Roger Grimsby dated the hatcheck girl, Goldie Hawn lived across the street (at 888 Eighth Ave.) when she was a go-go dancer. She'd come into the club and my father would give her dinner."

A former governor of New York got so drunk one night he had to be carried out. And a late-night talk-show host was banned because he couldn't hold his liquor, says Joey Rizzo.

Jilly was a tough kid from the lower East Side, but with a refined appreciation for music and the people who make it.

In the mid-'50s he opened his club, a hip hotspot where musicians felt secure about experimenting with their art.

A young Peter Nero was the house pianist for two years.

"Jilly was a gem," he says. "Very generous. And he treated entertainers great."

### Private audience

Nero, currently director of the Philadelphia Pops, recalls after-hours jam sessions — when doors were locked and shades drawn — with people like Vic Damone, Buddy Greco and Tony Bennett.

In 1962, Monty Alexander was a 19-year-old Jamaican who had only been in the United States for a year. Rizzo and Sinatra saw him playing piano in Las Vegas and one week later he was in New York, working at Jilly's.

"I couldn't believe I was living my dream," Alexander says. Here was a kid who was entertaining such heavy hitters as Quincy Jones, Alan King and Miles Davis. But, he notes, the one who sent the room into hyperdrive was Sinatra.

Two or three times a week the place would buzz with the code phrase "He's on his way," meaning Sinatra was dropping in.

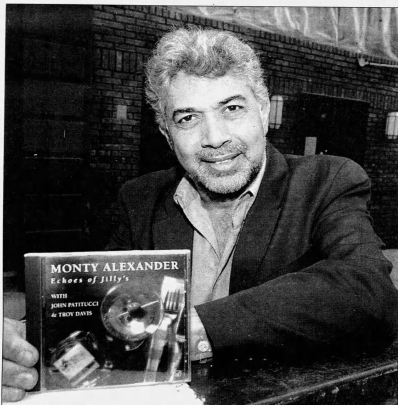
The "S" table, as it was called, in the rear of the main room, would be set up for Frank and his cronies, always with a bottle of Jack Daniels.

Alexander remembers one night when Jilly spread the word to "Clear the joint." Sinatra wanted to sing, he just didn't want an audience. Rizzo went so far as to open a temporary Jilly's South in Miami Beach when Sinatra was there filming "Tony Rome."

"I wanted to do something to remember Jilly, the man who meant so much to me," says Alexander, whose latest CD is called "Echoes of Jilly's." The jazz instrumentals are not only an homage to Rizzo, they pay tribute to the singer who immortalized the tunes.

"Mr. Sinatra — not Elvis — was the King," Alexander says. "He was the hippest of the hip."

(Coe writes frequently for *The News*.)



**FULL MONTY:** Jazz pianist Monty Alexander stands on the site of old nightclub with his Jilly's tribute CD. RICHARD HARRIS



**GLORY DAYS:** Go-go girl Goldie Hawn got meals at Jilly's, Mayor Lindsay scrapped over parking and Nat King Cole was a regular.



## Time to Take a Look Back at a Few Jilly Scenes of Winner

- **Name:** Jilly Rizzo, born Enigilio Rizzo
- **Birthplace:** Born and reared in Queens
- **Club:** Jilly's
- **Location:** 256 W. 52d St., across the street from the Musicians Union and down the block from Birdland
- **Currently:** Samovar, a Russian restaurant
- **Family:** Two sons: Joey, who lives in Fort Lauderdale, and Willie, of Las Vegas. A daughter,

Abby, lives in California

■ **Brush With Law:** Convicted of taking part in a loan scam in 1990; put on probation and sentenced to 200 hours community service because of his age

■ **Finale:** Killed by a drunken driver in Palm Desert, Calif., on May 6, 1992, on the way to his 75th-birthday party