Caruso: Learning to Live with Success

By Therese Stani
The Hillsdale Collegian

Editor's Note: Therese Stani has been acquainted with the band members of Caruso since they began playing together. She recently interviewed the group, who will be performing in the union Friday night.

Caruso is definitely one of the hottest bands on tour in today's national college circuit, and included in their plans is a stop at Hillsdale College tomorrow night at 7:00 pm.

Its members have been playing together professionally for almost four years. During that time, Caruso has been rubbing shoulders with some very big musical acts, such as Joan Jett, Rick Springfield and most recently, the band opened for UB40 at DePauw University. The band is also considering an offer from Huey Lewis and The News to play in Chicago.

In addition, Caruso was selected as one of 16 national bands to be sponsored by Miller Brewing Co. as part of its Miller High Life Rock Network. The sponsorship includes equipment contributions from music-related companies, promotional support in the way of t-shirts, jackets and buttons, and a record deal with a major record label.

"We're committed to just one goal," explained saxophone and guitar player, Joe Caruso, "and that is to be a national recording act."

Joe, 26, is joined by his brothers Mike Caruso, 27, bass and trumpet; Dave Caruso, 24, keyboards and guitar; and Rob Caruso, 22, on drums. Newly added this year is guitarist Brad Davenport.

The band's first taste of national recognition came from nominations by the National Association for Campus Activities. College and university programmers placed Caruso among competition for annual awards in two categories: Entertainers of the Year and Contemporary Artists of the Year. Former nominees include The Police, Journey and The J. Geils Band.

When the band isn't touring, they are busy at work in the studio. Caruso has recorded five singles and an EP album on Personal Records. Their most popular single, *Princess*, is being released by RCA on a compilation album this spring.

"One of the reasons Miller chose Caruso was because RCA expressed an interest in their music," said Rob Sanders, project coordinator for Miller Brewing Co.

According to Rob Caruso, other major record labels have indicated an interest in signing the band. "There is only one more thing to do that we haven't done yet," offered Rob, "and that's to get our foot in the door by signing with a major record company."

Caruso plays a variety of songs that are aimed towards a pop, dance style. *The Detroit Free Press* described Caruso's music as "infectuous, polished power pop."

Their sound has often been compared to Huey Lewis and The News because of the horns and vocals or to The Clash because of the guitar sound. At times, a sound much like that of The Romantics or The Beatles may also be heard.

"Everyone has a different interpretation of who we sound like," Mike explained. "Just last week someone told me that we sounded like a new European band."

When performing, the group caters to a live audience by playing with the crowd and joking with each other.

"Sure their music is good," said Gary Reynolds of Reynolds and Associates, a promotion firm based in Wisconsin, "that's why the record companies are looking at them. But their overwhelming success so far is a credit to their live show. It's exciting to watch these guys on stage."

The show has gotten great reviews all over the country, even under the most adverse conditions. Reportedly, at a Milwaukee performance, the temperature outside was a record-setting low and, inside the concert hall, the air was a brisk 45 degrees. However, according to a review in the *Milwaukee Journal*, "Caruso played as though they were in front of a sold-out crowd at Madison Square Garden."

"On stage, we like to project a three-dimensional image," laughed Joe. "Seriously, we try to present state-of-the-art pop that is fun, but not trite."

The members of Caruso began playing their instruments when they were in grade school, and like all musicians, they too had a number of major influences.

"I would have to say The Beatles-John (Lennon) and Paul (McCartney), Elvis Costello and Squeeze have influnced me," said Rob. He also listens to the Calypso, Latin-style music of Harry Belafonte. "Maybe because I'm a drummer," Rob continued, "I hear drum parts that other people wouldn't hear when I listen to his music."

In the past, Caruso has played at colleges and universities, street fairs and nightclubs. "Big concerts like playing with UB40 are okay," admitted Rob, "but we don't get much feedback because we don't have an opportunity to chat with people. I prefer a smaller setting."

According to Mike, meeting a lot of people is probably the best part of being in the entertainment business. However, every job has its drawbacks. Rob kidded, "I don't like the fact that I'm sitting down. It's rough to get out all that emotion while sitting on a stool."

The members all agree that their biggest break thus far has been the sponsorship of Miller Brewing. "We try to publicize and promote the band so they can move on to bigger and better things," said Sanders.

He described The Network as being the only program in the country that supports up and coming bands as opposed to already-established superstars. Miller saves Caruso approximately $20,000 a year in the way of promotional support.

"It's kind of a reciprocal thing," Sanders continued. "Miller helps the band; the band helps Miller. Caruso is an intricate part of the Network. The guys are a pleasure to work with because they're so professional."

One of the reasons Miller chose Caruso was because of the band's strong regional following. As a result, of this support, the band has installed a "Caruso Hotline." (The number is (313) 671-8341). Originally, scheduled appearances were printed up by the band, but because things are happening so fast now, an itinerary became impractical.

Detroit radio stations have also picked up on the rising popularity of Caruso. The band has been featured at rock radio parties hosted by WLLZ and WRIF. Also, because of Caruso's versitility, they may be doing a WNIC pop radio party.



Joe, Dave, Rob and Mike Caruso will be appearing in the union, Friday at 7 p.m. courtesy photo

Two weeks ago, Caruso spent a weekend as the official band of the final Indy Car Races in Miami Beach, Fla. "At first, people were looking for us to be stuck-up as a result of our success. Now they're just wondering what will happen next," said Rob.

Mike and Joe handle the business aspects of their careers, while Dave and Rob do the major portion of writing for the group.

"Anything inspires me to write a song," explained Dave. "The best songs are those that other people can relate to. If I wrote about my chair, for example, people wouldn't be interested.

"Anyone who's ever tried to be a little different inspires me," he continued."

Rob admits that his favorite songs to play are those that he writes. "Not that they're better songs," he noted, "but imagine sitting down, writing a song, working on melodies and then playing the song for people. Everyone is proud of what he does, and I love to see people singing my songs on the dance floor."

Joe can think of one more goal of the Carusos', "I would like to tour Europe and be successful in more than one country."

And success has not been a stranger to Caruso thus far. Brad hopes the best is yet to come. "I wouldn't be with Caruso if I didn't think so," he concluded.